

Muriel Neal



A Surrey Childhood
in the 1930s and 1940s

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by

Muriel Neal (née Hunt)

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**Herbert Henry Hunt, Fanny Hunt (née Hitchings) and baby
Alphaeus – Muriel's father**

A SURREY CHILDHOOD

In the 1930s and 1940s

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The Family

PERHAPS I have always liked green as a colour, because it conjures up one of my earliest memories. I had a little outfit, which was the palest of apple greens, and consisted of a long coat and a poke bonnet, adorned with the tiniest of pink roses. I wore this outfit every weekend in the spring of 1932 (I was two years old) when my father took me to stay with my paternal grandparents, who lived in South Godstone, Surrey. We travelled in Dad's motorbike and sidecar which I loved to ride in. The object of the exercise was to get me used to being out of the way, as the birth of my sister was imminent. Not that I knew. I am sure I did not notice that Mum was getting fatter, and I do not remember being told there was a baby on the way.

Dad's motorbike seemed to me a big black monster with a very noisy engine. The top of the sidecar lifted up, and a few old feather cushions were put on the seat and I was lifted in. Being small, the cushions enabled me to look out of the perspex windows on the front and sides. It only took 20 minutes or so to reach Granny and Granddad Hunt's home, but it always seemed a long journey to me. They were in 'service' as were most working class people of their age, and during one of my stays with them, a summons arrived from their employers, Mr. & Mrs. Hoare, up at 'The House'. My grandparents were asked to sleep in while the family were away, and I was to go too. My only real memory of this time was that I refused to go to bed until I could look at the large picture of a horse on the wall at the bottom of the wide and creaking stairs which led to the servants' quarters.

My sister's birth in August 1932 meant little to me, except I asked Mum why she only had one eye. The other eye was closed when she was born, and did not open until she was about seven days' old – that must have been a relief for my parents.

— My parents

My father, Alphaeus, was born in January 1902 to Herbert and Fanny Hunt (née Hitchings). He was the second and only surviving child – an older sister had been stillborn. Little Alf, as he was called, went to the local Church School in South Godstone. He had to walk 1½ miles to get there, down a country lane and up a long path, locally called the 'black path'. The path was owned by the Railway, and consisted of black cinders, which they were continually adding to – very

uncomfortable under the feet. Alf's schooling was very basic, but being a country lad he knew all there was to know about country life. One of his hobbies was collecting birds' eggs, which were displayed in a sewing box belonging to his mother. Alf had been born with crippled feet and a spinal injury, for which he had to spend two years in hospital between the ages of 18 and 20 years.

He was a big tall man, weighing 15½ stone and six feet tall. His thinning hair made him look older than he really was. He was a kind and tolerant man. His one disappointment in life was not being able to become a doctor. There was not much hope for a working class lad to attain such a high goal in life. His one chance was blown when he forgot to post a crossword competition entry – the prize of £1,000 would have paid for any medical training. Two people shared the prize, as there was no outright winner. On checking his entry, Dad's answers were all correct. He never did another crossword for the rest of his life.

My mother, Annie (she was always called Nancy) was born in Henley in 1904 to John and Caroline Snook (née Smith). She was the older of two children. Her brother Sidney, was 4½ years younger – the reason being that their father was away for most of the First World War serving in France. Nancy's schooling hopped from one county to another. Her parents were also in 'service', but my maternal grandfather was a restless man. They moved from London all round the country six or seven times, including South Godstone where they stayed the longest. My maternal grandmother was determined that her bright daughter was going to get a good education, and so Nancy was sent to Reigate High School for Girls, where she learned French, Greek and Latin – a posh education for a working class girl. How did her parents afford it? No one knows. Her father was a bit of a rogue and 'acquired' many objects during his years in service. Perhaps he sold some of them.

Mum was a neat little person with prematurely grey hair. I do not remember her hair being any other colour. Looking at photographs of her in an old family album, she had obviously been a very pretty young woman. She was still good looking in her thirties. It seemed to me that Mum did everything at double the speed of anyone else, even walking. It was difficult to keep up with her.

— My Maternal Grandparents

My Grandmother was born Caroline Smith in the village of Wookey, Somerset. She had numerous brothers and sisters. Their parents were schoolteachers. At an early age she entered 'service' in a London house. Her position was upstairs maid. Later, in another London house, she met my grandfather, who was a groom. My grandfather was John Snook, and he was born and brought up in Upwey, Dorset. At the time they married, Grandpa was 25 years of age and Granny was 32, a secret she tried to keep all her life!

Granny Snook was a prim and proper little lady. She had neat bobbed hair and her pale face was made even paler by the powder she dabbed on her nose and cheeks. In the mornings she wore a kind of cotton overall over her working clothes, and as was the habit, she changed for tea. She always looked neat. Sometimes she wore a black and white *crêpe de chine* dress, and sometimes a knitted suit, of which she had several. Mum had knitted these for her, and in return Granny made Jen and me dresses from any material she could lay her hands on. No patterns were ever used. We had dresses of mauve and white cotton, made from cut-down uniforms from the big house, and on one occasion she made matching coats and hexagonal berets for us both from pinky-mauve velvet, which were discarded curtains. All Mum had to do was to send our chest and arm length measurements. When Grandpa went to Scotland with the 'family', he always brought back some tartan material, so we had a number of plaid skirts.



Granny Snook
Caroline Snook (née Smith),
mother of Annie Louise

Granny used to try to curl my hair. It was as straight as a die, while Jennifer had thick curly hair. I was always on tenterhooks when she insisted on doing this, as invariably she burnt one of my ears with the curling tongs and anyway after a couple of hours my hair would return to its natural state.

— My Paternal Grandparents

My paternal Grandmother was born Fanny Davies Hitchings in Brixton, London. She also had several sisters and a brother. She entered 'service' as a nanny, and was to remain one even after her marriage to my grandfather, Herbert Henry Hunt. His parents came to South Godstone with him and his sister from Risby, Suffolk, presumably with the family they worked for, which also came from Suffolk. My Granddad became head gardener on the same estate. His father before him was a carpenter on the estate. The family they worked for were millionaire bankers, and my Granny was nanny to all of their children, three girls and a boy. Something I never knew until after my Granny died, was that she had a glass eye. Apparently she was accidentally struck in the eye, as a child, by an arrow fired by her brother.

Granny Hunt was a soft and cuddly Gran. Being a nanny by profession, she knew exactly how to handle us – firm but kind. In all the years I knew her, I do not remember her ever leaving her cottage. Maybe an occasional visit to us and that's all. Her clothes were plain and nearly always reached her ankles. She always wore long and heavy Victorian earrings. Consequently over the years, her pierced ear lobes had turned into ¼ inch long slits, purely from the weight of the earrings. She looked the typical grandmother of the time – dumpy face and figure, spectacles on the end of her nose, and hair scraped back into the obligatory bun.

Granddad Hunt always looked cheerful, but never was. He had round rosy cheeks and a thick moustache. He had the ruddy looks of a man who spent most of his life outdoors. There was nothing he did not know about gardening, and apart from the 'house' he kept us as a family supplied with fruit and vegetables all the year round.

My parents married in 1928, lived for a year in a flat in Coulsdon Road, Caterham, and then moved to 'our house', having bought it new in 1929. Granny Hunt lent them the deposit of £60. Of the eight semis built in Birch Avenue, Caterham, most of the residents were to stay 30 years or more. Opposite was a row of council houses, and there was always rivalry between the two factions, but on a friendly basis. One of Dad's hobbies was our vegetable garden and Mum saw to the flower beds and lawns. It took years to sort out, as it was virtually a ploughed field when they moved in. Saturdays and Sundays were gardening days. In the evenings, whilst tea was being prepared, my sister and I would sit on Dad's knee and he would tell us stories he made up. Sometimes we were involved, and had to tell him what he had 'dug' up in the garden that day. First there was a tin of sardines, and then an angel cake. So convincing was the story that my sister refused to eat any of the items for tea that day, much to the annoyance of Mum.

Dad had other hobbies apart from ordinary gardening. They were breeding budgerigars and growing and exhibiting sweet peas.



Muriel, aged 3 years, and her sister Jennifer, aged 6 months

Our house was semi-detached, with a long back garden backing onto a field. Inside, the small kitchen had a stone sink, and a built-in dresser with glass-fronted cupboards above. There was a hatch in the wall where you passed food through to the small dining room, which had a small table and four chairs. On each side of the fireplace stood two wooden slatted armchairs, on which were dark brown velvet cushions. There was also a sideboard against one wall, on top of which were a variety of ornaments including a metal crumb tray. Above the tiled fireplace was a wooden mantleshelf, and on this stood a chiming clock, a letter rack, and several other objects of the period. The sitting room, or front room as we called it, was very smart. Covering most of the floor was a real Persian carpet, given to us by Grandpa Snook, no doubt purloined from somewhere. In one corner recess stood a lovely Edwardian glass cabinet, the lower doors covered in marquetry. In the other recess was a wind-up gramophone – our record collection included *Pennies from Heaven* sung by Bing Crosby, *the Laughing Policeman* and *Busy Bee* by Arthur Askey. A walnut piano was pushed against the far wall. A three-piece suite in blue brocade finished the room. Upstairs there was a small landing, and off this led two double bedrooms, a single bedroom or boxroom, and a small bathroom with a geyser to heat the bath water. A set of oak furniture with beaded decoration was in Mum and Dad's bedroom, probably new, whilst in the other two bedrooms the furniture was obviously second-hand, as nothing matched.

Our next-door neighbours in the early 1930s were Mr. & Mrs. Dangerfield. They were an older couple who had no children of their own. They were a kindly pair,

and Mrs. Dangerfield took charge of me on several occasions. She was the first person to take me to the cinema. I was about four years old. We saw Gary Cooper in a cowboy film. We walked the 1½ miles to the local flea-pit as it was called, and walked home again. I was too young to understand the plot, and I was rather terrified of the whole thing, which involved people being tied up and fired at.

As a boy, Granddad Hunt had taught Dad how to use a rifle. In fact, they both owned their own. Their main targets were wood pigeons which were a nuisance in the kitchen gardens of the 'House'. There were plenty of rabbits to shoot, and we often had rabbit pie made by Mum – a lovely pie crust, under which was rabbit meat, including the kidneys, liver and heart. Whenever the fair came to town, Dad would be the first to visit the shooting range. He never took us, perhaps it was because he went in the evening after work. The next day he would show us what he had won. Our glass cabinet gradually filled up with cake dishes, jam jars, sweet dishes and novelties. On other occasions, he won a teddy bear and other toys. In fact, during one season, he was banned altogether. He was politely asked to leave as he was winning everything – he was such an expert shot.

Dad had grown sweet peas for as long as I can remember, and it was a very serious business if you were going to put them on display at the local horticultural show. First you dug a long trench and filled it with the best manure, made with all sorts of rotting vegetation. Seeds were carefully selected, and usually provided by Granddad Hunt. Dad chose to put them straight into the ground, having firstly put up the bamboo canes on which they were to climb. A very careful watch was needed after the seedlings came up, as they seemed to be the slugs' favourite food. Rings of salt and bits of straw were placed round the tender plants until they had gone up the sticks a good way. You had to be an expert to get the flowers to bloom at the right time, ready for the show. Each year the summer show was held at a different stately house in Caterham. A large marquee was erected on the lawn for the main show. Teas were usually served indoors. It always gave us the chance to see the inside of some of these grand houses. They all had their own gardeners, but they were only allowed to enter their exhibits if the show was not being held in their own gardens. In later years, the junior school was to be the venue, and it was here that Dad came unstuck one summer – in the sweet pea section, of course. Entries had to be in three vases provided, five spikes in each, and three distinct kinds. When it came to the judging, it was found that Dad had four spikes in one of his vases. Of course he was disqualified, much to his embarrassment. He always swore that someone else must have removed one of his spikes.

His breeding of budgerigars came later. Dad decided that an ideal place for an aviary would be to build one onto the back of the garage. The main structure was a wooden framework, on to which was nailed fine-mesh chicken wire. A door was also made in the same way. Half of the structure was covered in at one end, acting

as a dry place in which nesting boxes could be placed. These Dad made by hand, and he attached them to the back of the garage wall under the covered part. All manner of twigs and perches were placed in different places to make it interesting for birds and humans alike. We started off with two pairs of budgerigars, and before long we had 20 or 30. I thought budgerigars' eggs were very uninteresting. They were just plain white, but who would have thought that the skinny little things that hatched would turn into such beautiful birds. We had every shade of blue, yellow and green, and occasionally a mauve or white one. Whenever there was a bird show, Dad would enter. He won a lot of prizes, and the coloured certificates awarded were plastered all round the walls inside our garage.

Next to the aviary, Dad built me a rabbit hutch. I had fancied a rabbit as a pet. When the bunny arrived he was just a tiny bundle of fur. It was up to me to look after him, feed him and clean his hutch out once a week. Sniffy grew bigger and bigger. I gathered dandelions and wild parsley for him to eat in the summer, but in winter he had to eat oats and bread. Mum gave me a trowel with which to scrape the droppings and wet straw out of his hutch. Rabbits always seem to use the same corner to do their business in, but the smell used to get up my nose. After a year, I decided that rabbit-keeping was not for me, and I asked Mum if she would mind me giving him away to Jean Turner, a schoolfriend. Unfortunately, Stella Smith, another schoolfriend, told her mother that I had promised the rabbit to her. It was not true, and although I told her mother so, she did not believe me. She was so nasty to me about it that I handed Sniffy over, really only too glad not to have the responsibility any more.

From an early age I liked shopping. Nearly every Saturday, Mum, Jen and I, and later baby Chris, did a circular tour of Caterham Hill. We usually started at Mr. Medwin's, the grocer's, and then on to Westway, stopping to look at Miss Farley's hat shop. Her hats were displayed in the double windows on stands of varying heights. They were like long poles with velvet domes on top. Many of the everyday hats cost 2s. 6d or 5s. 0d. Miss Farley was all smiles and advice. She talked in whispers. Her own black curly hair touched her shoulders, and mingled in with the severe black long-sleeved dress she wore. She made polite conversation, clasping her hands in front of her. Mum often had a trying-on session. She bought a black creation one day, but Dad make her take it back. He hated it. The haberdashery shop in Westway was run by two elderly spinsters – the Misses Corney. I liked these two ladies. They looked very much alike, except one was much taller than the other. Both had nearly white hair, pulled back into a bun. Their loose style dresses came nearly down to their ankles. They reminded me of Elsie and Doris Walters, the variety act. Their shop was all higgledy-piggledy. I do not know how they found anything, it was in such a muddle, but they always managed to lay their hands on what was wanted.

Mr. Bunce, the photographer, had a shop and studio in Westway. He took pictures of us all from time to time. He was forever dashing out from under the black cloth over his camera, adjusting the clients or their clothing. His bushy hair looked a mess by the time he had finished a session. There was an assortment of shops in Westway, including a gents' outfitters, cycle shop and baker's. Walking on to the High Street, you came face to face with Mr. Letch's double shop. One side was for menswear, and the other knitting wool. He was an upright military-looking man, with a precise manner. He was always dressed in a mid-grey suit. He was the brother of Miss Farley, but why the different names, I did not know.

The old forge stood at this end of the High Street, and I loved to watch the horses being shod. Opposite was the post office, run by Mr. Brind, a rather crusty little man. He was a keen cricketer and bowls player, and you could see him in the Park on summer afternoons. Further up the High Street was the Co-op. The manager was Mr. Simmonds, the father of my friend Eileen, who lived two doors away from us. He always looked immaculate in his overall, which was tied at the middle, his smart shirt and bow tie peeping out at the top. He had rather bushy grey hair and appeared to be a lot older than my own Dad. What a kindly man he was! Whenever Eileen and I popped in to see him, he would give us things such as a few broken biscuits, or perhaps 'dummies', as he called them. These were empty packets or tins which were used for display purposes. We used them at home for playing 'shops'. On one occasion, Mr. Simmonds gave us each a World Atlas in book form, and explained to us that all the pink areas belonged to Great Britain. There seemed to be a lot of pink areas.

On the corner of High Street and Court Road was a little sweet shop run by Miss Taylor and her mother. They also did home-made ice-cream, known by the local children as 'scabbies'. We thought they were made from custard and ice, as there were little lumps floating about, hence the name. Court Road led to Birch Avenue, so our afternoon walk was complete.

We often had street traders on a Sunday. The winkle-man had his own van, but the muffin-man pushed his own stall and rang his handbell to catch attention. Onion-men always looked alike. They all wore rough outfits and black berets when they came over from France in September and October, riding their push-bikes round the streets selling their large onions, which were strung together and hung over their handlebars.

From time to time gypsies called, selling their home-made pegs. These were just two pieces of pointed, smoothed wood, bound together at the top with a thin strip of tin. Although their clothes were ragged, the gypsies always appeared clean, and their weatherbeaten faces and hands were permanently tanned. Most of the gypsy women had two or three children in tow. Mum often gave them a bag of biscuits,

and in return they would heap blessings on us all, and sometimes we were given a lucky charm or a piece of white heather for luck.

Both Mum and Dad were nature lovers, so I suppose it followed that I should also be interested. Unfortunately, Dad with his crippled feet was not able to walk very much, so it was Mum who took us on our country walks. In the spring it was great fun to find the first wild flowers – usually celandines and coltsfoot. Violets were next, and we found the dark purple ones and white, scented ones under the hedges of Caterham College. They were usually quite small flowers with short stalks, but the scent was beautiful. A large variety of violet also grew in a nearby thicket, but these appeared later in the spring. Primroses were next, and these were to be found in the woods at View Point, after which came the cowslips, nearly always hidden by tufts of grass. I only knew two fields where they grew in abundance, but unfortunately houses were built on these sites later on.

There were numerous summer flowers in the fields behind Caterham golf course — flowers such as ox-eye daisy, bugloss, wild rose, wild parsley and yarrow. On nice afternoons in the summer, Mum would take us for a picnic in these fields. Sometimes we would have company, usually Mum's friend Mrs. Woodhouse, and her two daughters. We would romp about the fields playing hide-and-seek behind the bushes, and would pick flowers at the end of the afternoon to take home. We would get home at about 6 p.m. so that Mum could make Dad's tea. He was not keen on picnics himself, and both our Granddads hated them. Lounging about on the grass and being bitten by insects was not for them. Much better to be seated at a table indoors.

Walks in the autumn were on Sunday afternoons, and we would take small sacks with us to fill with leaf mould. This we would pick up in Grubbs Wood, about a mile away and opposite *The Harrow* inn.

I seemed to spend most of my early summers sitting on the back doorstep crayoning or drawing. Although we were not well off, we still managed to have an annual seaside holiday in August, usually with friends who lived in Worthing. Mr. Hughes was a local sea fisherman, so we had a lot of fish to eat during our stay. We travelled to Worthing in our Austin Seven, which Dad bought from the garage where he worked as a mechanic. How we sisters boasted about our car to our friends. There were no families with cars in our street!

Early Schooldays

I started at Caterham Hill School in 1935. Mum took me in the morning, picked me up at noon, returned me to school at 1.30 p.m. and picked me up again at 3.15. What an assortment of kiddies we were. Among them were George, who always

wore hobnailed boots, Freda who was forever sucking 'Imps' – a type of cough sweet, Ruby, who had a constant cold, Rose, who fell asleep all the time, and another two girls who had the surnames of Salmon and Pepper. My class teacher in the Infants' School was Miss Noble, whom we all called 'Snowball'. I thought her unkind, as she loved slapping the backs of our legs when she thought fit. I did not respond to any of her teaching. On one occasion, Miss Noble asked us before we went out to play if any of us wished to go to the lavatory. She kept stressing the point so much that I just stood there and went! After being made to wipe up, I had to sit in my wet knickers until the end of the day, and then much to my disgust, Miss Noble went outside to tell my mother, who was waiting for me at the gate.



Muriel aged 6 years

Most of the girls wore gym slips to school, made of rather a coarse serge in navy blue, and tied at the waist with a strip of woollen braid. The outfit cost about 5s. 0d. We wore long woollen stockings in the winter and white rayon ankle socks in the summer. Whatever the weather, Mum refused to let me change one to the other unless it was the first week of June or the first week of October. I had a thick navy wool overcoat for the winter and most children had the same. When we got wet, the smell was awful in the school cloakroom as our coats steamed over the iron radiators. Even the smell of wet Wellington boots and the chalk we used in our lessons got up your nose.

During my infants' schooldays, I became a monitor. This entailed collecting the registers daily from each classroom and returning them to our headmistress, a formidable lady by the name of Miss Ellis. Her room was at the top of a steep flight of stairs. I always knocked on her door before she bade me 'enter' in her usual sharp manner. I was quite afraid of her, as she often glared at me over the top of her glasses. I was quite glad to leave the room. I must have held my breath, as I always seemed puffed out when I reached the bottom of the stairs.

Special days to remember at school were May Day, and dancing round the Maypole, and Empire Day with much flag-flying. We all took a Union Jack to wave. Most children bought twopenny rosettes of their choice to pin to our clothing on boat race day. I always chose Oxford, as I preferred the dark blue to Cambridge's pale blue.

Our lessons were fairly simple in Infants' School, learning the three 'Rs' being the most essential. One of the first things girls learned at school was how to knit. I must have been about six years old when I was given some fat needles and a ball of wool to knit a doll's scarf. I found casting-on the hardest. How clumsy I felt, as I struggled to wind the wool round the needles. After several weeks, I managed to finish knitting the scarf and then I had to add a fringe, a process of knotting by pushing a double length of wool all along the ends of the scarf and pulling the strands through the loops. After this I progressed to a doll's dress, which I found difficult when I reached the increasing and decreasing parts. Boys were not required to knit. They went off to another classroom – to do I know not what!

At playtime in about 1936, I watched fascinated as the adjoining piece of ground was being prepared for the building of a new senior school. Lots of little faces were pressed to the fence that summer as we watched the workmen digging the foundations and then building this big new school, which, one day no doubt, we ourselves would be attending.

Once you had made a few friends at school, you were usually invited to their birthday parties. One party in particular was Ruth Dullaway's. Her father was a greengrocer, and he made deliveries with his horse and cart. Mum took me to the party and Dad and Uncle Sid brought me back. We walked of course – very few people had cars. As far as I could make out, all parties seemed to be the same. You stuffed yourself with jelly, sandwiches and cake, played a few games and went home. This party must have been near Christmas, as we were given crackers to pull. Inside mine was a beaded bracelet which I liked very much, but it was much too small, even for my slender wrist, so I had to give it to Ruth's baby sister, Iris. I remember finding a silver bracelet at school and slipping it on my wrist, but it was quickly claimed back by a school mate who had lost it earlier. Mum did buy me a cluster ring one birthday. In the centre was a green stone, surrounded by smaller white stones. I had it for about a week and then all the stones fell out! In one silly

moment I slipped a chicken ring on my finger and then found I could not remove it. My finger swelled and swelled, and then it started to go blue. I cried and cried and had to wait for Dad to come home to file it off.

A Christmas party I remember going to before the war, was held for the families of servants and staff of Stanstead House, South Godstone, where my Granddad was head gardener. It was all very exciting. Granny Hunt had acquired two very pretty party dresses for Jen and me. Mine was apricot satin with a ruched frill running down each side and my sister's was made of pale pink velvet. On the evening of the party, we were all ushered in the front door by the butler (usually we had to go round to the servants' entrance). The party itself was held in the panelled ballroom, and connecting doors led to an anteroom where we beheld the most fantastic amount of food, plus lemonade. It was so colourful and good looking. The young man of the house, Mr Stephen Hoare, organised the games and dancing, the music being provided by a small group of musicians, which included a couple of violinists. At the end of the ballroom stood an enormous splendidly decorated Christmas tree and at the foot was amassed lots and lots of presents. We all went home with something lovely, given to us by the lady of the house. I had a beautifully-dressed china doll.



Stanstead House, South Godstone

Our toys were few, but we each had a doll's pram with a teddy bear and a handmade soft dolly. I loved to dress up, but could only do this when I played

with Eileen Simmonds, who lived in the end house. She was an only child and seemed to have everything we didn't, including lovely little dressing-up outfits. One in particular I liked was a blue silky dress edged with a silver material. There was a hat and wand which went with it. I think it all represented a fairy queen. My sister and I loved birthday parties at Eileen's. There was always such a lot to eat. Jennifer came off rather badly one year though. We children were all sitting round the dining room table, whilst Mrs. Simmonds was to-ing and fro-ing from the kitchen serving us with lemonade. One of the favourite treats of the day was called chocolate kisses. They cost a halfpenny each. They were more of a sweet than a cake, and consisted of creamy marshmallow coated all over with dark chocolate, and embedded on the top were 'hundreds and thousands' which were minute dots of coloured icing. There was just one chocolate kiss on each plate. Unfortunately my sister could not count, and before anyone realised, she had eaten four chocolate kisses. Mrs. Simmonds was furious and told her she was a very greedy little girl.

When I was five years old I caught measles, most probably from someone at school. This seemed to be the start of some nasty times in the family. Jennifer also caught it, and for a time she was desperately ill. Mum had to keep her in semi-darkness and a coal fire was kept going in the bedroom through the night, as well as the one downstairs. She pulled through, only to contract whooping cough a year later. Funnily enough we slept in the same bedroom and I did not catch it. At this time my Uncle Sid was getting married, and none of us could go. I was very disappointed. Granny Snook was not too keen on her new daughter-in-law, whose mother was a naturalised German. She was a widow and lived in London. Because of the First World War, when Grandpa was away for years, Grandma hated all Germans.

Shortly after the wedding Granny Snook was knocked down in a back street of London. It happened at dusk. A boy on a bicycle with no lights ran into her as she was crossing the road. He rushed off at speed and was never traced. Gran had a broken hip, and although it was pinned she was never able to move about much again. She was in her sixties at the time and had always been extremely active.

After school on sunny days in the early summer Mum, Jennifer and I would go to the local asylum fields as they were known. These were just part of the local mental hospital grounds. We slipped through the hedge to pick dandelions. We only picked the flower heads, for these were needed for wine-making. We had a large crock for this purpose, and after all the bubbling and frothing for weeks, it was strained and bottled. It was stored on the larder floor, and occasionally we all jumped when a cork popped out. We girls were allowed a glass of wine on high days and holidays, and very strong it was too. Somehow we always managed to attract the odd mouse in the larder. Dad was a dab hand at setting traps, and no mouse ever escaped with the cheese.

Until I was five years old my maternal grandparents lived in Connaught Mews, Marble Arch, London. They lived in a large flat over the garage. This led to a lovely little courtyard, in which my grandmother had troughs and pots filled in the summer with geraniums. I loved to play there. It was sheltered and warm. Gran had made me a rag doll called Jemima, and she lay in a green painted wicker cot. Gran had also made sheets and blankets, and the little pillow was made up from embroidered flower motifs, square in shape, and joined together on her sewing machine. These motifs were given away in cigarette packets.

We usually went to London at Christmas and Easter. My Uncle Sid was single then, and still living at home. He was an electrician by trade and worked at Hamleys at this time. He always bought us expensive presents. At Easter he bought us large eggs decorated with roses or violets. We adored them, but were only allowed to eat small amounts at any one time. At Christmas time there was always a large tree surrounded by all sorts of goodies. One of my Uncle's presents I remember most was a pop-up book of fairy stories. During our stay in London at Christmastide we were taken to Selfridges. Gran treated us to see Father Christmas, and at 2s. 6d a time it was considered quite expensive. One year I received a pale blue tin box, about 6 inches square which rattled. I had to open it at home, and I was so thrilled with the contents. It was full of glass beads of every colour and shape. They were manufactured in Czechoslovakia. I spent many hours over the years making and remaking necklaces.

On sunny days in London, Jennifer and I strolled with Dad through Kensington Gardens. No walk was complete without visiting the 'Elfin Oak', an old tree trunk with animals and gnomes peeping out of holes. There was a playground nearby, and I always dawdled when we got there. I was hoping that one day I would be allowed to have a go on the slide. It never came about. Perhaps it was considered too undignified for smart little girls! Another treat for us was to go to Regent's Park Zoo. Every time we went it poured with rain, and we never did get our promised ride on an elephant.

Another event I remember in 1936 was when Dad took me in his car to the highest point in Caterham, where we could see a large red glow over towards London. Rumour had it that a large fire was raging in that direction. It turned out to be the burning-down of the Crystal Palace.

Happy Days at Hindhead

In 1936 Grandpa Snook decided that they would leave London and find a position in the country. They ended up in Hindhead, Surrey, and here they were to remain for the rest of their working lives. 'Hindhead Court' was situated on the main Portsmouth Road – not that you could see the house from the road as it stood in

enormous grounds. There were lakes, woods, lawns and gazebos. Large black iron gates straddled the long drive up to the imposing house. The owners, by the name of Bodie, were corset manufacturers. The daughter and son-in-law, Mr. & Mrs. Kelton, (who was a writer of romantic novels) also lived there. They had some children who were at boarding school. Numerous staff were employed. The head gardener had a detached house close to the road, and umpteen glasshouses to look after. He grew the most marvellous dahlias. The retired head gardener, Mr. Hay, lived on the other side of the Portsmouth Road in a large detached bungalow. It stood at the end of a pine tree wood where Hindhead Court Garage was situated and the new home of my grandparents. The garage itself was as big as the house alongside it. There were four bays and each had its own individual up and over door. Inside stood a Daimler, Packhard, a runabout and a sports car. Grandpa also managed to squeeze in his own little Morris as well. At the back of the garage, which was brick-built and with a tiled roof to match the house, was a small long room in which there was a toilet and sink. Come winter or summer, Grandpa always used this as his own private bathroom. He fixed up his own cabinet and mirror, towel rail, etc.

The house itself had three double bedrooms, a bathroom, two reception rooms and a large kitchen. I was always confused as to where I was, as Gran insisted on calling the dining room the kitchen and the kitchen the scullery – a habit, no doubt, from her years in service. It was, she said, a badly-designed house. A toilet led directly off the scullery (very unhygienic) and also a small coal room. The coal was delivered down a chute from outside. A full size door on the scullery side allowed the scuttles to be filled from indoors. All the rooms in the house had brass door-knobs and you could not open any one of them quietly as the springs inside the knobs made varying squeaks.

At one end of the dining room was a Welsh dresser built into the wall. On it was an assortment of vegetable dishes and dinner plates – most of it white china edged with navy blue and gold. An assortment of furniture filled the rest of the room. Nothing matched. There was a large dining table with stout legs. Its surface was covered in oil cloth, pinned down at the edges with drawing pins. A small oak cupboard, filled with assorted china, stood in the corner of the room and to one side was a black Rexine sofa and a small bamboo table on which newspaper were stacked. Linoleum and a rush mat covered the floor. There was a black oven set in the wall, kept hot by the coal fire next to it. Above the mantel shelf was a long mirror. Grandpa was always accusing us of looking at ourselves all the time we were eating our meals at the table.

There were two grandfather clocks in the house. One stood at the top of the stairs next to a couple of black and white Victorian pictures, one of which depicted the *Charge of the Light Brigade*. The other grandfather clock was smaller and exquisitely carved, and stood in the sitting room next to a three-panelled screen. I

disliked screens. I always felt there was someone hiding behind them. Grandpa had 'acquired' the fancy grandfather clock from one of the stately homes he had worked in. The family were moving, and a lot of articles were being sold off. On or before auction day Grandpa hid this clock in the toilet and removed it to his own home when the coast was clear. It was never missed. I wondered how many other things came to him in a similar way. I often thought the brass fender in the sitting room looked expensive. It was made of a close-knit metal mesh about 18 inches high, curving round the fireplace – the brass top rail finished off with knobs at each end. Jennifer and I loved this room at Christmas, where we could play with our new toys, either a post office set, or a sweet shop, or a new doll. We were usually on our own in here, as the adults seemed to prefer chatting in the other room. When all the family got together, Jennifer and I had to sleep on a mattress on the floor of Gran and Grandpa's bedroom. It was such a novelty for us.

Summer at Hindhead was lovely. First order of the day was to feed the birds. Granny soaked bread and put it in a pie dish and then placed it on the bird table near the kitchen window. All manner of birds came to feed, including two or three types of woodpecker. One beautiful bird had red and green feathers. Down two sides of the house ran two enormous lawns, and beyond these were the woods. Mostly they consisted of very tall pine trees with an occasional holly dotted here and there. A path ran down the centre of the largest wood and another up to one side. They were so soft to walk on as millions of pine needles must have fallen there over the years. One of the jobs Jen and I liked to do was to collect fir cones. Gran would give us a basket each, and when we had filled them, they were emptied into a tea chest kept at the side of the cooker in the kitchen. Of course we had to keep returning several times when they got too heavy for us. We filled a whole tea chest in a couple of days, and once dried out the cones made a lovely alternative to burning coal. They crackled and spat a lot, so a fireguard was necessary.

On the perimeter of the woods, in the dense bracken and fairly near the house was a brick-built incinerator about six feet square. It had a miniature brick chimney and perched on top was its own small chimney pot. The oven, as we called it, had a metal door and latch, very like the type of door on an old-fashioned range. Jen and I had many happy hours playing there. We used grass, leaves and sticks on old tin plates as our make-believe meals and sometimes Gran would give us a couple of real buns to use.

It was Jennifer's birthday whilst we were staying at Hindhead one summer, and as she wanted a boat to sail on a pond, Mum, Jen and I walked into the next village to the toy shop. Grayshott was a funny-shaped village. Two long roads met at a point, in other words it was triangular. If you were at the wide end of the triangle, you could use a path to get through to the other street. This path was edged with very tall pine trees, and their roots stuck up through the ground, which was fine grey sand mixed with hundreds of pine needles. You had to watch every step, as it

was easy to trip up on the big roots. Although it was not my birthday, I wanted a boat too. If I had not made such a fuss, Jennifer could have had a much better boat. As it turned out, we ended up with a small boat each. Also in the village was a lovely china shop. Granny Snook was collecting a tea service, and so Mum bought one or two pieces each time we came. The design was called Titian ware. It had a cream background with a border of fruit, mostly cherries, plums and blackcurrants.

I was always a little nervous of Grandpa Snook. He was rather gruff, and if anything went wrong or disappeared it was always we children's fault. I remember being blamed for pulling out his newly-planted cabbage plants, which I had not – it was probably some animal. On another occasion we were accused of causing a bird to abandon its nest and eggs, which we had not. I once broke a small china diamond shaped dish, accidentally knocking it from a shelf. I was really anxious about what Grandpa would say, so I secreted it in my apron pocket and went deep into the wood and threw it away. I was afraid to go Hindhead for a couple of visits and I know it played on my mind. Nobody ever missed the ornament, probably because there were several laying about of the same kind. Grandpa used to get very annoyed with us girls as we used to have fits of the giggles, usually in the evening when we had been looking at magazines. Granny used to take in a magazine called *Home Chat*. Featured in this booklet was a little girl with very curly hair, and for some reason this column used to start the giggles off. Once we started, we could not stop. Mum eventually lost patience with us and off to bed we went.

At Hindhead between two pine trees at the corner of the wood, a swing had been made for us. Two thick pieces of rope held the wooden plank steady. The seat was rather high off the ground, and it meant taking a backward jump to get on. As the ropes were quite long, you could swing really high. One day when Jen and I were sitting side by side and swinging merrily, we heard a noise behind us. There was a strange man standing there, with a battered hat and sporting a large moustache. We jumped off the swing so fast and tore indoors. Granny was alarmed when we told her our breathless story, so she locked and bolted the doors and windows. Although they tried not to show it, both Gran and Mum were frightened. Where is your father? they demanded. Five minutes later, a loud knock on the back door, followed by Dad's voice, reassured us all and he was let in. He was wearing a battered hat and false moustache. Mum told him it was the silliest thing he had ever done, but I saw him quietly laughing to himself on and off all day.

There were lovely walks around Hindhead. One was called Miss James' walk. Little narrow paths led through the low-growing wortleberries and heather. You had to be careful of snakes in the summer. There were often adders lying on the soft grey sandy paths, basking in the warm sunshine. In August when the

wortleberries were ripe we would take containers and fill them, so that Granny could make pies. We loved these pies, but if you ate too much, they could give you tummyache. Another walk was to Wagoners' Wells. A series of paths led through the woods. Everything was soft and springy underfoot owing to millions of pine needles. Wagoners' Wells themselves were a series of three small lakes linked together with paths and woodland – a local beauty spot enjoyed by all. About a mile from Granny's house was the Punch Bowl, a natural bowl about two miles round covered in scrub, and near the top slopes beautiful heathers of several different kinds grew. One summer there was great excitement, as quite a large fire developed and it was extremely difficult for the fire engines to get near enough. There was quite a lot of wildlife, including foxes, and at Christmas time we stood shivering round the top of the Punch Bowl trying to follow the Hunt, and watching the dogs and huntsmen trying to negotiate the difficult terrain.

Dad became ill in 1936. From time to time he had severe stomach pains. He tried to hide it from the family but we all knew he was unwell. Eventually he was forced to visit the doctor, and after some X-rays, a gallstone was discovered. An operation was necessary, so after being on the waiting list for a time, Dad went into the East Surrey Hospital, Redhill to have his gallstone removed. Unfortunately at this time I contracted chickenpox and I felt quite ill. I was confined to bed and one afternoon Mum had to leave me on my own whilst she visited Dad, taking Jennifer with her on the bus. Although it was only five miles away, the journey would take about an hour as the bus travelled around many roads. I was not happy at being left on my own, but poor Mum had no other choice. Mrs. Francis from next door promised to keep an eye on me, and the back door being open she did pop upstairs a couple of times to make sure I was all right. It seemed the longest afternoon of my life, although I did have crayons, books and a couple of games and some plasticine to play with. Mum had left me some calamine lotion to dab on my spots, which relieved the itching. Whilst waiting for it to dry, I lay looking at the wallpaper. I was in my parents' bed – Mum thought it would be a change for me. Mauve and pink egg-shaped rings were on the wallpaper. I could make out faces and animals in the pattern. The more I looked the more I saw. I sat bolt upright in the bed, not wanting to look any more, as so many faces directed their eyes at me. I would play with my plasticine and make something nice. I rolled out different colours and made a plait with them. I thought this would look nice on my head. After admiring myself in the dressing-table mirror, I was horrified to find I could not remove it. The plait had firmly stuck to my hair. I was in a panic trying to pull it off. Bits came away in my hand, but the rest was unmovable. Although I told myself it would be all right, I began to cry. By the time Mum came home, I was in a sorry state. It took a lot of soapy water and combing to get all the plasticine out. Mum comforted me and told me all about Dad's operation. They had removed a

gallstone the size of a walnut, and the interesting thing was that it was covered in stumpy spikes. It was so unusual that the doctor was going to put it in the hospital museum. Dad came home after a fortnight and although he was terribly thin he made a good recovery.

Right from an early age I was a child who was always finding things. Did I walk with my eyes to the ground? In my collection I had a china pig, a faceted red glass heart, probably fallen from a necklace, and a fancy watch which turned out not to be real. My parents promised me a real watch on my seventh birthday. It was bought from the local post office. It cost 5s.0d and had a Swiss movement. It was carefully wrapped and given to me to carry home. Mum, Mum's friend and her two children, Jen and I walked through the park. It was a hot day and I was thirsty. After drinking from the fountain, we walked on our way for about ten minutes, when I suddenly realised that I had left my new watch on the fountain. I raced back as fast as my legs could carry me and with a panting heart discovered the watch was still lying there. What a relief!

Weekends at South Godstone

During the summer of 1938 our Dad started taking Jen and me down to Godstone every weekend to stay with Granny and Granddad Hunt. Their little semi-detached cottage was old and the contents ancient. It was primitive there, but we children accepted it all as the norm. The floors were of brick overlaid with newspapers and then pieces of carpet on top. The kitchen had no sink and you had to go out of the back door to reach the nearby scullery, where there was the one and only water tap. The scullery itself was tiny, with just enough room for two people to move about. In the corner was a built-in copper,



Stanstead Cottage

which had to be filled with water and a fire lit underneath. The one and only living room, which led off the kitchen, had an assortment of furniture. It had a chaise-longue at each end of the room and a large armchair with brocade cushions stood in the corner. One cushion had a handworked silk picture, probably from India, inset. Next to this was a small black range, where all the cooking was done. The mantel above had a brass rail with a hanging edge, attached to which was a tasselled fringe. A large black marble clock with matching figures stood on the shelf. On the other side of the range was a fitted cupboard, and occasionally Granny Hunt would give us a sweet from a tin hidden therein. Windows looked out in two directions, and under one stood a small side table. Below this was a long inlaid music box of the barrel and hammer kind. In the other corner was a piano covered in loads of glass ornaments including a pink glass vase with dangling pieces all round. Shelves round the room held an assortment of glass cases in which there were stuffed squirrels and a fox. In the centre of the room was a largish heavy table and four chairs. There was never much room to get round all these things and the only other space was filled by a heavy serge curtain, behind which there was a door leading to a long porch. Aspidistras and ferns of every kind grew in abundance here.

The outer door of the porch led to the front garden. Neat little cinder paths were edged with box, as was the round flower bed. Down a slippery path from the back door and behind the shed was the toilet. It was a small wooden building. Inside a large piece of wood stretched from wall to wall. In this was the hole you sat over. A metal container underneath disappeared into the darkness. The floor of the toilet consisted of loose bricks and an old piece of carpet was laid on top. I liked to study an old calendar nailed to the wall. The picture depicted a boy scout in an old-fashioned uniform, and he was reprimanding a smaller boy for raiding a bird's nest. I dreaded going to this toilet in the winter. The cold and dark was enough to put anyone off. We had a bicycle lamp to light our way and it sat beside us while one parent patiently waited for us to finish. The overpowering smell of powdered disinfectant and the howling draught underneath the wooden latched door put us off from staying down there too long.

One day, in the cottage garden, when the vegetable patch had been turned over, I collected all the scraps of crockery I could find. It seemed to be the custom to throw broken china out into the garden. I do not remember ever seeing a dustbin. Everything that could be burnt was burnt on the range. I displayed my pieces of china on one of Gran's trays and they became quite a talking point in the family. Some patterns were remembered, some not. The crockery itself ranged from very fine china to common earthenware. Beautiful flowers and oriental designs were admired alike. There was a piece of Gran's Royal Doulton tea-set in the collection. I had dropped and broken one of her precious cups whilst wiping up. I felt so guilty about that.

On winter evenings we sat round the table playing with an old wooden stable, which had been my father's toy when he was a child. Above the stable floor with its sectioned-off stalls was a little door leading into the loft. In it were little sacks filled with the appropriate grain, or some with hay. The only light we had in the cottage was a very large brass paraffin lamp standing in the middle of the table. It hissed and flickered, throwing a strange dim light around the room and onto the faces of two large pictures of our great grandfathers – one in a frockcoat and the other a double for President Lincoln.

Granny Hunt, being rather strict in her religion, would not allow us to knit or sew on Sundays. We could read certain books. As this was the Lord's day, knitting and sewing etc. was considered work, and Sundays were a day of rest. Whenever we girls stayed for the weekend at Godstone, we had to kneel down after breakfast on Sunday and say prayers, which were repeated after Gran. Granny Snook was more liberal, so whilst we could do all these things when staying at Hindhead, we could not do them in Godstone – very confusing to we children, but we obeyed the rules.

Sometimes when we visited Granny and Granddad Hunt, we would be invited up the road to 'Aunty's'. She was Granddad's elder sister, a short little lady with rather prominent teeth and a high pitched voice. Her only child, Aunt Edith, was a lookalike. Aunty was a widow, and had been long before my time. Edith, on the other hand, was married with three children, but she had never left her parents' home. Her husband was always away. He was supposed to be in the building trade and travelled around the country. He was generally known as a rover with no responsibility for his family. We always had a lovely tea at Aunty's. Thin-cut small sandwiches were presented on old fine bone china, along with dainty little cakes, all hand-made. A beautiful crisp white tablecloth on the heavy mahogany table set it all off. The conversation was always of gardening, relations and friends. In my early years, when we had no car, we left straight after tea for the long walk down Hart's Lane to the bus stop. When we were at Gran and Granddad's, we walked in the opposite direction and along the cinder path to catch the bus, two stops before Hart's Lane. Although the cinders hurt your feet, I preferred this walk. I loved watching the trains hissing and spitting as they drew into the station near the end of the path. The path must have been half a mile long, and lay below the railway bank. On the other side of the path, a thick hedge obscured a big field, but three-quarters of the way along was a corrugated-iron gate and a round hole by the latch allowed you to look through and watch the dozens of rabbits feeding and scampering about near the edge of a wood. The path ended at the main road.

Right opposite was Uncle Jack's little grocery shop. He was not a blood relation but an old friend of Granddad's. He came originally from the West Country. I loved his little shop. On the outside it had an awning made of wooden planks placed vertically and supported at each end by two upright posts. Opening the

heavy door with its noisy brass bell, you stepped onto a floor of entirely plain unvarnished wood. Round the perimeter were hessian sacks from which came all sorts of aromas. Everything was bagged and weighed, from dried fruit to sugar and tea. Flour was already in cloth bags. At the back of the shop there were tins of peas, carrots and baked beans neatly stacked on wooden shelves. Tins of cocoa and liquid coffee were on other shelves. At one end of the old wooden counter, there was a selection of butter, cheese and ham, all neatly covered in mesh lift-off containers in order to keep the insects out. In the summer several sticky fly-papers dangled from the ceiling. Behind the door at the back of the shop, you stepped down into the living area and beyond lay a small kitchen. The back door led onto a neat backyard which housed the toilet. The small garden was edged with shrubs. No time for gardening here. The shop was always open. On the wall of the living room was a large photographic portrait of Uncle Jack's wife. She was a beautiful woman called Jessie, who had died very young. As a widower in his thirties, Uncle Jack employed a girl of 15 to work in the shop. Her name was Coral, and she lived round the corner. He must have been pleased with her as eventually she moved into his house and acted as housekeeper as well. It was an arrangement that was to last all their lives.

Mrs. Young was the lady who lived next door to Granny and Granddad Hunt. She did the laundry for the big 'house' and consequently her hands were always red and wrinkled. She was, I think, quite elderly. Her hair was grey and tied back in an Edwardian style. Her sombre-looking skirt nearly touched the ground. Her drab grey blouse, the sleeves always rolled up, was topped with a white bib apron. I never saw her dress in any other way. The brick-floored laundry room at the back of the house was constantly in use – water and steam everywhere. A lot of the washing was done by hand with scrubbing board and thick soap. Suspended from the ceiling was a wooden rack on which piles of steaming clothes were hanging. A pulley took them high into the beams. The mangle had huge rollers and stood in the corner. Mrs. Young's daughter was a jolly woman, who had a little girl. There also had been a boy, but he had died of meningitis when three years old. Whenever we visited Mrs. Young Mum asked us not to stare at the photograph on the mantelpiece. Many times I had been warned, but by eyes were drawn irresistibly to this photo. It was of Mrs. Young's grandson. They did not have a picture of him, so one was taken after he died. His eyes were open and whatever part of the room I stood in they seemed to follow me round.

I was very susceptible to tragedies and strange noises. One winter's night at Gran and Granddad Hunt's, I heard someone tapping at the window. My parents ignored it. Perhaps they did not hear. Again I heard it. When they drew back the curtains for my benefit, there was no one there. Nobody seemed concerned, but years later they told me it was quite a common occurrence – others had heard tapping over the years.

One weekend in the middle of November, we suddenly realised why we were spending weekends away. The lady of the 'house', Mrs. Hoare, who was the only one with a telephone, came across to the cottage and announced that we had a baby brother. She was as thrilled as we were. Someone to carry the good name she said. We were too excited to sleep that night and we lay in the large brass-knobbed bed looking round the rose-papered room in the half light admiring the china cherubs and Staffordshire ornaments – also the china animals displayed on shelves and dressing table. In the morning we were woken by Gran carrying some hot water to wash ourselves with in the large china bowl. I was not very keen on the smell of the clear Pear's soap that lay in the nearby dish. Our toothbrushes were dipped in the same water and the tinned toothpaste we used floated round the water in the bowl, causing a frothy mess. We could not wait to get home to see our baby brother, who was to be called Christopher.

I think Dad was very pleased to have a son. It made the family complete and he was a beautiful baby.

I was a shy child and hated visiting aunts and uncles and friends. You were always expected to sit still and be quiet unless spoken to. It was boring listening to the adults talking, as their main topic of conversation was discussing other relations and their friends. Jen and I escaped into the garden if we could. We had very few relatives and those we had seem not to have had any children. Occasionally during the summer months we would visit Dad's cousin, Uncle Sid Hitchings, his wife Aunt Lucy, and their children, Gwendolin, Kenneth and Beryl – my second cousins. They lived at Woodcote near Purley, where they had nursery gardens. Their small house was unusual, being made entirely of wood. There was plenty of room to play outside, and with our parents we walked around the big greenhouses admiring all the beautiful flowers. Indoors, my cousins had a large wooden rocking-horse. I loved that animal, and always wished it belonged to me. We visited Mum's cousin and husband quite a few times. They again were to remain childless. They were my godparents and every year I received a lovely present on my birthday. Their main interest was tennis, so we learned a lot of what went on in their local tennis club. Wimbledon was discussed at great length.

When we were smaller they made a great fuss of Jennifer, who was a pretty little girl with lovely curly hair. They patted her on the head and fussed over to such a degree that my jealousy got the better of me and one day on our way home in the car I bit her on the arm. I never forgot it and I was severely reprimanded. I was also thoroughly ashamed of myself.

— Junior School

I suppose I must have been about 8½ when I moved to what was then called junior school. My 'year' seemed to be segregated into three classes – A, B and C, as

simple as that. I was in class A, having done quite well in the Infants. My last report had said 'Muriel has made very good progress indeed' I came sixth in the class. My new class teacher was Miss Syvier, who was a little short elderly lady. For PE lessons we had a young male teacher by the name of Mr.Ward. He had changed his name from Leatherbarrow – perhaps he was fed up with the length of it. He was very much the athletic type. The boys had to strip down to shorts and the girls down to navy knickers and vests. I took my vest off one day and I was quite hurt when Mr.Ward said to me 'little girls do not remove their vests'. Later as war came, I remember Mr.Ward changing in the classroom into an army uniform which had tartan trousers. Then he left school and I never saw or heard of him again.

Talk of War

In the summer of 1939 my parents talked of war and I listened as they discussed it with their friends. As a child of nine, it meant little to me. I was aware that something was going on, but did not realise that things might be different in the future. My first fear came when Eileen Simmonds, the girl who lived next door but one, told me that a man was coming round to measure us up for gas masks. I was not sure what they were. We both decided to run away over to the Park. It did not work – the man came another day. I was trembling as he tried to reassure me and my sister that there was nothing to be afraid of, and he showed us how to breathe properly with the masks on and how to adjust the straps over our heads. Christopher, being just a baby, had to be put bodily into a special encasement, which was operated with bellows.

Fear came to me again on 3rd September 1939 when war was declared. A siren had been erected on Westway Common. Mum explained to us the meaning of this strange wailing noise. An up-and-down sound meant we were to take immediate cover because the Germans were going to bomb us, and a long wail meant it was all-clear to go about our business again. Mum had a very worried expression on this first day of war. We all sat huddled in the hallway, supposedly the safest place when a house falls about your ears. That first air raid was non-existent and after the all-clear was sounded we all carried on as before.

We were not sure if we were to return to school after the summer break, but return we did. We were under much instruction those first few days as to what to do and what not to do during air raids. Frantic digging began in the school fields. Air raid shelters were being built. Every household was also to have an air raid shelter. It was called an Anderson after the man who invented it. Made of galvanised metal, it came in sections. It was up to you to erect it somewhere. Dad had to do away with part of our garden, not too far from the house, and with the help of a neighbour he must have dug three or four feet down over a period of several days. Two pieces of metal formed an arch and these were bolted together with more sections added,

plus end pieces and a gap at the front through which you climbed. The shelter, when complete, stuck half out of the ground. You covered the arched part with as much earth as you could find. Most of it came from the hole that had just been dug. Wooden slatted beds were fixed inside the shelter, two on each side, one above the other and a small one across the end. It was wise to have a slightly raised floor to avoid any water. Our shelter was always quite dry, but a neighbour two doors away built his in an unfortunate place. It was always under a foot of water due, it was thought, to an underground stream that used to come up occasionally in our own garden.

When the bombing became quite bad in our area, all schools were closed for a while. Some teachers and parents offered to hold classes in their homes and my teacher, Miss Gubb from the Junior School, held a small class in her country cottage about a mile away. I walked there and back. She was an old-fashioned middle-aged lady and a kind and gentle person. Her hair she kept screwed up at the back of her head and she never wore a trace of make-up. We were given a glass of milk and an apple at break-time, and a tour round her garden and orchard if the weather was dry. This was better than sitting in a stuffy classroom. Miss Gubb commented on the different jumpers I wore, all knitted by Mum. Her favourite was my brown lacy one with the pink edging.

Mum and Dad allowed our front room to be used for a small class of infants. It was handy for Miss Dean, the teacher, as she only lived round the corner in Wood Lane.

Christmas 1939 was spent at Hindhead again. There did not seem to be any changes. We all had plenty to eat. Even at the age of nine, I knew we could go short of food. Everybody was forever talking about it and I know Mum had started what she called an 'emergency box' in her larder, in case of dire shortages, but rationing did of course come later.

Wartime – 1940

Things seemed to change more in the spring of 1940. We children at school were given a lot of instruction on self-preservation. We were told what to do in an air raid or a gas attack. Not only did we have fire drill, but air raid drill as well. We all had to get in single file and hurry, not run, to the shelters. I always tried to linger a little to be at the back, which meant I was one of the last ones in and near the door. I had a dread of being entombed if a bomb should fall nearby, and I thought I would stand a better chance of survival nearer the entrance. The shelters were approximately 30 to 40 feet long and running down each side was seating made of slatted wood. Everywhere smelt dank – a mixture of chalk and clay.

Overhead wires held up the temporary lighting. I was always relieved when the all-clear sounded and we could return to our classrooms.

If we were going or returning to school during an air raid we had to make our way quickly to the nearest public shelter, which were dotted throughout the town. Small concrete structures called ARP (Air Raid Precautions) centres were also set up on the corner of certain streets where a warden in charge would help if necessary. During the spring of 1940 there were frightening things for me to experience. Death had not touched my life, but it was happening now. A boy of almost my age, and whom I knew, was machine-gunned to death as he walked home from school. Our local grocer, Mr. Medwin, who was trying to rescue children off the street, was also killed. The next day, the gory details were discussed at school.

We had a lot of disturbed nights that summer. I hated being woken in the middle of the night. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and trudged down to the Anderson shelter in the dark. Sleep was not always possible as there was an incessant drone of enemy planes making their way to bomb London. When it was fairly quiet, you could hear beetles and other insects scuttling around the inner walls of the shelter. Fortunately we children, being on the top bunks, were not too affected as the big beetles and other wildlife seemed to prefer the floor.

I think daytime raids were more frightening, especially when so close to home. RAF Kenley Airfield, a mile away, was the target one Sunday and we all sat terrified in the hallway whilst bombs fell all round.

Several German planes were shot down and fell in Caterham and I remember three dead Germans were found in a schoolfriend's apple orchard. Another time an airman had parachuted from his aeroplane and landed in a neighbour's greenhouse. He was challenged, but put up no resistance, and was taken off somewhere. After an air raid my friends and I competed against each other to find the biggest piece of shrapnel. Dad dug out some large pieces that were embedded in our wooden garage doors. We had a visit one day from an air raid warden to see if he could throw any light on a cylindrical hole about four inches across that had appeared in our vegetable patch. It could be an incendiary bomb, it was decided. It was a very deep hole and nobody could see anything, so it was quickly filled in and forgotten.

As the bombing continued my parents decided to send us down to Hindhead for a while, which was well away from any enemy action. We loved it there, but unfortunately Granny Snook was not a very fit and active person and all the extra work of washing etc. got her down, so we all came trooping back to Caterham.

Bletchingley – 1940-42

As summer approached and we were still being bombed, my Dad's employer suggested we go and live in the basement of his very large house (Bletchingley House). Our makeshift kitchen was a virtual fortress. It was, in fact, a concrete bunker. An escape route led out to the garden at one end. This was like a window-door. You took three or four steps up to it and slid out to the right or left. Immediately in front of the window was a pile of sandbags in case of bomb blast. There were several upright pillars in the centre of the room for extra strength. The only pieces of equipment were a cooker, a deep white-china sink, a small table and a cupboard. A toilet led off to the side. Our lounge-cum-dining room was enormous, or so it seemed to me. I think it was originally a games room. Along one wall of the lounge was an open bookcase with many lovely children's books. There was a complete collection of *Babar the Elephant* books and I read every one. To one side stood a piano, which we all messed about on. Our dining table and chairs were placed by one of the two long windows and a couple of easy chairs completed the room. A door to the side led one step up to the garden.

A large section of the lounge was curtained off to provide privacy around a double bed in which my parents were to sleep. My brother had a cot nearby. When the air raids were particularly bad, one of the two mattresses from the double bed was put on the floor for we girls to sleep on. Sometimes we used to have a fit of the giggles and a very cross Dad would smack us on the bottom to quieten us. It seemed to work! Normally Jennifer and I had two single bedrooms that were located on the second floor of the house. My room led off the nursery and was in the main part of the building and Jennifer's was in the servants' quarters. Her bedroom was plain and had just the bare essentials. A small wooden bed stood in the corner and a chest of drawers at the foot. Lino covered the floor, with just a mat by the bed. We all shared the servants' bathroom. My bedroom was more luxurious, having belonged to the son of the house. Both he and his sister were sent to Canada for the duration of the war. My bedroom was in shades of blue and I slept on a deep divan. There was a ball-shaped glass light on the ceiling above the bed and a dangling cord allowed you to operate the light without getting out of bed to use the switch. The down-to-the-ground curtains were also operated by a pull-cord. On the floor was a luxury fitted carpet, and under the window was a radiator – my first taste of central heating. I even had my own wash-basin. I knew I would be loath to leave here and all its comforts.

Our stay in Bletchingley was to last about one and a half years and I loved every minute of it. We had the freedom to roam the enormous grounds of Bletchingley House. Jen and I used to laugh and say to each other 'shall we go down the garden?' Back home in Caterham the garden was only a cabbage patch compared with the acres of land there. Outside our back door was a rockery, then a path to

the right, leading to more terraced rockeries and further still to tennis courts backed by fields. If you turned left from the back door, paths led to kitchen gardens and an orchard. Two gardeners were employed; one was resident and lived in the lodge at the corner of the main drive. He and his wife had a niece staying with them. Her name was Ruth, and Jen and I were to become quite friendly with her as she was about own own age. There was another cottage on the estate and this was occupied by the chauffeur.

In the spring I roamed about the gardens on my own. I liked hunting for birds' nests. There were about 40 small conifers flanking the driveway to the big house and after searching every one I found a wren's nest, beautifully fashioned in moss and with several eggs inside. Near the kitchen garden a robin flew out of a yew hedge just above my head and a closer inspection revealed her nest with a clutch of eggs. I watched and waited for several weeks to see the eggs hatch and eventually the chicks fly away. There were quite a few blackbirds' and thrushes' nests, but they were always much higher and I was unable to see into them. In the grounds there were some trees I had never seen before. An almond and a walnut grew in the drive and near our back door was a mulberry. It must have been there for many years, as its branches were gnarled and old-looking. It was a strange shape too. Some of the branches were close to the ground and we were able to sit on them. When the fruits came along, they were like clusters of very large raspberries, only a deeper shade of red and with a different taste.



At Bletchingley

(Left – Right)

Jennifer, Muriel, Ruth (gardener's niece) and Christopher

Jennifer and I were registered at the local school. It was close by. Coming out of the driveway from the house, you turned left by the lodge, and the school was just round the corner at the top of the High Street. It was small and secluded – maybe just three or four classrooms. The headmaster was Mr. Dobson, a jovial but strict man. Jennifer and Ruth were in one class, but I was in another. My teacher was a Mrs. Burgess, a grey-haired lady of middle age. She was a kind and likeable person and I was to learn more from her than any other teacher. She liked the things I liked – reading, writing, nature, embroidery and art. I had my first cookery lesson in what they called a temporary building. It was made entirely of wood, as other building materials were getting short, no doubt due to the war.

I became friendly with three girls – Daisy Carnell, who lived in the terraced cottages opposite Bletchingley House, Dulcie who lived on the outskirts of the village and Pauletta Sanz who was Spanish. She could speak very little English and could not write it at all. I think her family were in England after escaping the Spanish Civil War. She made great progress during the next year and was even able to read English a little.

Mum and Dad thought it was fitting that Jen and I should attend Sunday School. We went out of the right-hand side of the drive and then through the old High Street that runs parallel to the modern main road. On the corner of the old road stood the butcher's, which had been in the same family for 200 years. All manner of higgledy-piggledy houses ran on each side of the street down to the church gate. Inside the church, at the bottom end, was a group of lifelike stone statues – a family of mother, father and child. I often gazed on these, wondering why anyone would go to so much trouble. I attended Sunday School regularly, as I was anxious to fill my scrapbook with pictures. You bought a scrapbook at the beginning of Sunday school term and each week, for twopence, you were issued with a beautiful scripture picture which you stuck under the appropriate number. If you missed a week, you were not allowed to buy the picture the following week. This way you were encouraged to go every week and not have too many blanks in your book. Most of my schoolfriends attended and we all looked completely different in our Sunday outfits. Mine was a Sunday dress, topped with a rust-coloured wool coat and the matching hat had a brim turned up all round. I felt extremely smart.

— Escapades

One lovely spring day on our way home from school, Jennifer, Ruth and I decided we would go primrose picking. Nobody was at home at either of our houses, so off we went without telling anyone. Little did we know it was to cause such anxiety. We started off at about 4 o'clock. A short walk up the road led to a narrow downhill lane. Looking upwards we could see the old castle ruins. Below us was a large pond, almost a lake. We walked past and turned down a grassy path

towards the fields beyond. In the distance you could hear the occasional train. We would make for the embankments as we were sure primroses grew there. It was much further than we thought, but our spirits were revived when we found the most beautiful primroses, and yes, the best ones were on the embankment. They had such large flowers and very soon we had one big bunch each. We began our trek home. It seemed endless, field after field, until we again saw the pond and the steep climb up to the road.

There was a reception committee waiting for us at Bletchingley House gate. A very worried looking mother and Ruth's aunt – a quiet, small woman, was very distressed. Ruth's uncle, a sharp-featured man with a small moustache, was just plain furious. 'Do you know what time it is, Ruth? It's a quarter to seven', he bellowed. 'You will not be allowed out to play after school any more this week and there is no tea for you today!' He marched her off to their bungalow, his trilby hat jumping up and down on his head, as his voice pierced the air with his telling-off. Jen and I got off much more lightly, probably because Mum was so relieved to see us safe and sound. Funnily enough not one of us children was wearing a watch, so we had no clue as to what time it was. We met a very subdued Ruth the next day and no more was said of any future walks.

I do not know why Mum had such confidence in us girls, considering the mishaps that we had with our brother Christopher whilst we lived at Bletchingley. He was only about two when he fell into the small goldfish pond in the rockery one day. I am sure he would have drowned had I not pulled him out but his own concern as he raced home to Mum was that he might have swallowed some water spiders or been chased by a snake. We had previously watched a grass snake swimming there. In fact I did find a lovely snakeskin near the pond one day. It was in this area that I hurt myself. Some steps led down from the rockery to the tennis courts. I jumped four steps down into a pile of leaves. What I did not know was that there was a fifth step concealed under the leaves, and I badly sprained my ankle. What looked like a big black egg appeared on the side of my foot and I was unable to go to school for some time.

On another occasion on the estate Jennifer pulled back some barbed wire to let us through into a field, when suddenly she let go and it just missed Chris's eye. The barb cut the skin at the side of his eye and it left a permanent scar.

On one of our winter walks, we went down to the pond by the castle ruins. It was covered with ice and when I stuck my toe in the ice, it moved. I instinctively knew it was too thin and dangerous to stand on, so I dragged Jennifer and Christopher away. I remember my Granny telling me of seven children from her village drowning after falling through thin ice on the local pond. Five of the children were from the same family.

One of my finds in the Bletchingley garden was a beautiful dead dragonfly. It was a perfect specimen. Its lovely veined wings shone in the sunlight, which was probably why I spotted it lying there on top of some leaves. I picked it up gently, half expecting it to fall to pieces and carried it indoors. Not quite knowing what to do with it, Mum suggested pinning it to one of the uprights in the middle of the kitchen. It remained there for some time, until one day my sister completely destroyed it with her skipping rope. I know it was an accident, but I was quite upset.

Another time when Mum went out, she left me to do some washing-up. She always emptied the teapot into the toilet next to the kitchen. Unfortunately I hit the teapot on the edge of the pan and off flew the spout. I was worried and terribly upset by the time Mum came home. I had expected a good ticking-off and was surprised at her reaction of calmness. Another day, another mood, and things might have been different.

There was a back way out from our rooms at Bletchingley House. A long corridor ended at a side door into the garage. It was an enormous area, enough to house four cars. We went out this way to school nearly every day. It saved walking round the outside of the house. I noticed two bikes at the back of the garage, amongst a lot of sporting equipment. There was a boy's push-bike and a girl's push-bike, and they must have belonged to the son and daughter of the house, who had been sent off to Canada for the duration of the war. In June, on my tenth birthday, I was to receive the girl's bike as my present. Dad must have bought it for me. I was so thrilled. I had always wanted a two-wheeler ever since Eileen Simmonds had one back in Caterham. I had spent many an hour sitting on her bike when it was propped against their garage bench. All I had to do now was to learn how to ride it. I had every opportunity, as the drives at Bletchingley House were long and I had them mostly to myself.

Disaster was to strike later that summer as tearing round a bend one day I lost control, and the bike and I parted company. At first I did not think I was hurt, until I saw blood pouring down my knee from a wound inside my arm. I did not cry, because I did not feel anything. I only became panicky when Dad said I had better be taken to the doctor's as the cut in my arm was rather deep. It was only about $\frac{3}{4}$ " long on the inside of my elbow, but as I bent my arm, the flesh pushed out of the hole. My heart sank as Dad said it might need stitches. I was frightened.

Mum walked me down to evening surgery, the doctor's house being at the bottom of the High Street. It was a splendid Georgian house, with tall pillars at the front door. We had a long wait, but were eventually called into the doctor's room. He was a gruff balding man, with a penetrating voice. His white coat billowed out as he swung round in his chair. I did not like him. After examining my arm, he declared it was not necessary to have stitches. He applied some antiseptic, stuck a

plaster over the wound, and bade us good-night. I was quite relieved, but I know Mum and Dad were not happy with the situation, especially as I was left with a gaping scar, although it was not very noticeable on the inside of my arm.

This same doctor refused to see Mum when she cut her hand badly, as it was out of surgery hours. Mrs. Scrutton, the lady of the house, took Mum to her own private doctor, who treated her on the spot. What had happened was that Mum had the awful habit of cutting bread sideways, instead of downwards onto the board. One day the knife slipped and she sliced a lump almost completely off the top of her hand near the thumb. It looked like a slice of meat and needed several stitches to keep it in place.

Mr. & Mrs. Scrutton were going to be away from home for a while, so Mum and Dad were asked to keep an eye on the place. It gave us a lovely chance to explore the rooms we had never seen before. Up to now, we had only seen the servants' quarters. The cook was a fair-haired Irish girl named Vera and the housemaid was called Ruby. Both were resident and very shortly there was to be a third person, a nanny, as it seemed that Mrs. Scrutton was about to have a baby.

The back stairs from our basement rooms, led to a landing, on which was the servants' sitting room. Next came the kitchen, and then across the corridor to the large private dining room and a lounge. Beautiful views could be seen from these windows. An enormous formal pond filled with goldfish of every colour and size was the focal point. Paths led in all directions, some having statues at the end of them. We children strayed round this part of the garden sometimes, and in the end Mrs. Scrutton asked Mum to tell us to keep away from this area, as it was their own private domain. There were many bedrooms and two bathrooms on the second floor of the house. Luxury carpets covered the floors, even into the bathrooms. One bathroom was tiled all round. The tiles were patterned with exotic fish. Most of the bedrooms seemed large to me and the furniture huge and expensive-looking. Mum had a sneaky look in some of the wardrobes just to admire the silk dresses and fur coats. Unfortunately she did not notice Chris pick up a lipstick from the dressing table. He had opened it and squeezed the contents. What a mess. Mum had some explaining to do later. I cannot remember exactly what day the baby arrived. Nanny had moved in about three weeks previously. What a nice lady she was – young, and obviously fond of children. She treated us with great kindness and often invited us into her sitting room, to give us toast and marmite and a drink of tea. The nursery was next to my small bedroom. We were invited to visit the new baby, which was a boy. I was quite shocked when I saw him. Not only was he wrinkled, but he was a ghastly orangy-yellow colour. It was explained to me later that he was a very sickly baby. He was jaundiced and probably mentally handicapped as well.

The only signs of war we saw in Bletchingley were the occasional army convoys. Sometimes there were tanks coming through, their tracks making a rumbling noise on the road. Some empty houses and a hotel in the village were taken over by the Canadian Army who were helping us to fight the war. Their soldiers were a noisy lot. Every day they queued outside the local bread shop. Word had got around that Mr. Grice, the baker, made lovely doughnuts. He had a job to keep up with the demand and often ran out of sugar, which was getting short. Mr. Grice looked like a baker. He was short and fat and always looked hot and bothered. Being the only baker in the village, he must have made a good living from the Canadian soldiers whilst they were billeted in Bletchingley.

Vera, the Irish cook, and Ruby, the housemaid, became very friendly with some of the Canadians and were allowed to invite them to their quarters in Bletchingley House. As Christmas drew near, they invited a couple of lads to dinner, preparing the traditional meal. They waited and waited on the evening they were expected, but neither turned up. Rather than waste the food, Vera popped down to ask Mum and Dad if they could eat a meal, and from what we heard the next day it was greatly appreciated. They had a lovely time. They even had home-made wine and Christmas crackers, before staggering back to our own rooms. No more was heard of the Canadian lads and the episode was closed.

Occasionally dances were put on in the village hall, and so Vera and Ruby met other soldiers to bring home and entertain. The daughter of the couple who lived in the chauffeur's house was allowed to go to these dances although she was only 14. She never once spoke to Jen and me, although we passed in the drive quite often. She seemed aloof and solitary, perhaps she preferred it that way. She was called Bunty and was the only child of Mr. & Mrs. Temlett. Their cottage sat right on the driveway where Mr. Temlett was for ever washing and polishing the car. I found Mrs. Temlett rather a strange lady. She always wore trousers. For all the years I was to know her, I never ever saw her in a skirt. Her hair style never altered. Parted in the middle, she had long permanent waves that ran right round her head. How she achieved this effect, I never knew. Her face was white from too much powder, and her very thin lips were always made up with bright red lipstick. The family kept a mynah bird. It was a clever bird and mimicked exactly the tones of the voices of each member of the family. It also talked a great deal. I feared for the fate of this bird as mynah birds are fresh-fruit eaters. It ate mostly grapes and these were getting extremely short in supply, due to the war, and were expensive too.

Although we had air raid warnings at Bletchingley, the village escaped any real damage. A small bomb did drop in the school grounds one night, right in the middle of the grassy area in front of the school. It exploded, leaving a crater and an uprooted tree – ironic really, as we children were forbidden to set foot on this lawn – it was Mr. Dobson's pride and joy. There were no shelters at school, so

when the siren sounded we had to make our way quickly down the High Street to a general store called Taylor & Bristows. They had an enormous cellar which was full of big cheeses. As there were no seats, we either had to sit on a big cheese or on the floor. Lots of us had our own cushions. Mine went everywhere with me – into the classroom and sometimes I even took it to the pictures. Every now and then films were shown at the British Legion, which was in the next village, Nutfield. These events were usually on a Saturday morning or afternoon. Jen and I, and our friends, walked the two miles there carrying our cushions, as the wooden benches in the British Legion were very hard.

Whenever we were in the cheese cellar, we had to do school work. Quite often, the girls did embroidery. The lights in the cellar were very dim and it was an awful eye-strain. I did a lot of cross-stitch work. Even at home, I enjoyed embroidery. When the long grass was cut at Bletchingley House, I would gather it up and make an enclosure to sit in. I was quite content to sit and sew for hours on end. Granny Snook's Christmas present from me that year was going to be an embroidered linen tea cosy. On one side the flowers were going to be shades of pink and on the other side shades of mauve. Green leaves were scattered in between. Mum taught me all the types of stitches you can use and also helped me a lot with knitting.

Suddenly one day at school a number of children from London appeared. They were billeted in local homes. They disrupted the whole school. Most of them were spiteful, noisy and often accused us locals of telling tales to teachers. They were cocky and misbehaved. Fortunately they were older than I was, so they were not in my class. I had just heard that Granny and Granddad Hunt had been asked to take two boys from London. I dreaded meeting them, if they were going to be like that lot. When we visited Godstone on the Sunday I was already full of resentment. How dare two London boys take over my grandparents' home? I could not have been more wrong. They were polite and cheerful and we talked and played together.

We loved the long summer holidays from school. Ruth, Jen and I roamed the grounds of Bletchingley House. Often we would meet Mr. Putland, one of the gardeners, and he would chat to us, mostly about the wildlife in the garden. One of our favourite pastimes was to sit on the iron fence behind the tennis courts and watch the cows. There were about a dozen of them. They were quite tame and came trotting over to the fence when they saw us appear. We chose names for them all. One, we called 'Bully' as she was always pushing the other cows out of the way. Her behaviour, we began to understand, when one day she produced a beautiful brown and cream calf. On another day – much to our surprise – a donkey appeared in the field. He was tame and came and stood by the fence with the cows. We girls dared one another to try and sit on him. We all managed to do so by balancing on the top rung of the fence and sliding onto his back. We were all a bit scared in case he bolted. Far from it. He refused to budge an inch. Just as we

were becoming fond of him, he disappeared from the field. We were to find out later that he had been found wandering in the road and had been put in the field for his own safety until his rightful owner claimed him. It turned out that he belonged to the Canadian Army and was their mascot.

Some sunny afternoons Mum would take us all for a walk. The lanes and hedgerows had plenty of wild flowers, such as cranesbill, ragged robin, scabious and wild rose. We competed against each other to see how many varieties we could collect. We all came home with an assortment of flowers and leaves. As I was always finding things, it came as no surprise to anyone when one day on one of our walks I picked up a large red glass heart. It measured about an inch square and was about half an inch thick. Its faceted edges really caught the light. It had no holes in it and nobody seemed to know what it could have dropped from. It seemed too large to have come from a brooch. I only owned it for about a week. I kept it wrapped in a handkerchief, but somehow it must have fallen out, being a very slippery object. I was annoyed to think that someone else was now the owner.

Redhill was our nearest little town. It was here we would go if we needed new shoes or school clothes. There were a couple of general stores and a small Woolworths. We occasionally went to the big and imposing Odeon cinema. You always had to queue up to get in. We were usually in the 1s.9ds. The dearest seats were 3s.6d, but Mum and Dad could not afford that. The one film I remember most at this cinema was *The Thief of Baghdad*. I thought the colours in the film were wonderful. Another imposing building in Redhill was the Town Hall. It always gave me a horrid feeling when I walked past it. During the war the school dentist had a room there, and we travelled from Bletchingley to have our teeth looked at. Once, as another girl and I waited our turn, I was so scared that my tummy was making funny noises. The girl was full of bravado and chatted away to her mother. 'I wish I could be like that', I thought. When it came to the crunch, however, she was the one who came out of the surgery screaming, having refused to open her mouth. I sat in the dentist's chair feeling cold and shaky, but the couple of fillings I had done were no problem. The dentist was a woman, and her kindly manner soon put me at my ease. All the same, I was glad to climb back on the bus to go home.

During our next term at school, we were told that something exciting was going to happen. The Queen, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret would be coming through the village on their way to visit somewhere. We were all issued with small flags and on the great day all of us lined the High Street, each of us waving our little Union Jacks. The Royal car did slow down considerably and we had our very first glimpse of royalty. All three were in varying shades of blue and we talked of nothing else for the next few days. We discussed their clothes and bits of jewellery and their very smart chauffeur-driven car.

Winter came early that year. Looking out of the bedroom window at Bletchingley House after the first fall of snow we saw a lovely sight. The fir trees were the prettiest, although some of the lighter branches were bending. Nothing stirred, everywhere was just quiet and still. You could just see tracks made by animals and birds. No humans spoilt the view. We girls were soon outside making a slide on the path. The idea was to press the snow down hard with your shoes and then keep skidding up and down until you had a shiny length of compacted ice. The more you used it, the more slippery it became. It was a help to have a slight incline, as you could go a lot further. Mum had heard on the wireless that you could make very good pancakes using fresh snow, so she tried it one day. She had to make sure that the snow was absolutely untouched by anything. Mrs. Scrutton's Pekinese dog, called 'Puppy', often came round to our back door and wee'd on the rockery, so a careful inspection was made.

Christmas was soon to be upon us and we had end-of-term exams. I did very well in my lessons and I am sure it was because of my teacher, Mrs. Burgess. She was extremely fair to everyone and we all received individual attention. There was a competitive spirit and prizes were awarded at the end of term. I was going to try my hardest and hoped to be a prize winner. We had to choose an object for an essay and bring it to life. I chose an umbrella. I managed to write about four pages. Maths was not my favourite subject, but I pulled through quite well. Writing, drawing and scripture all came along on different days. As the prize day came, Mrs. Burgess called me and another girl to go to the front of the class. She could not remember which one of us was top of the class and which was second. She would have to consult her register. We both held our breath, and then she announced I was first and I was presented with a book called *House of Hidden Treasure*. The other girl received 2s.6d for coming second. I was so thrilled to receive this book and it became a prized possession. My parents were very pleased that I had come top of the class and Mum wrote an appropriate inscription inside the book. Another Christmas had arrived and it was very cold. I requested a knitting bag for a present, but owing to a misunderstanding, I was given the wrong sort. I wanted a sausage-shaped one with thin handles, but unfortunately I received a large black-patterned cotton one with wooden handles. I was so disappointed. I hated the bag, but I never said so.

Back to Caterham – 1942

In the early months of the new year Mum and Dad talked about going back to Caterham. Bombing raids had diminished and they felt safe to return home. Weather conditions were still bad and it was extremely cold. Dad borrowed a van from work and one Saturday in February we all helped to load all our belongings. Although we had no furniture, it still took two trips. Jen and I were sitting on a

box in the back of the van on the last trip. So much had to be squeezed in that the van doors would not close and so they were roped together. This meant there was a large gap through which the wind blew. It was not a long journey, about three miles, but we were very uncomfortable and cold. Chris sat on Mum's lap in the front.

Things were no better on arrival back in Caterham. Long icicles hung from the house and all the windows were frozen up. Mum lit the round black paraffin heater and placed it in the middle of the dining room. Dad fetched some firewood and rolled up some newspapers in order to start a fire in the grate. Even the coal was slow to burn and Jen and I held a newspaper in front of the grate to try and get things moving. We were too cold to take our coats off. It was miserable and I was glad to go to bed and hug a hot water bottle. Our house had been empty for a couple of weeks, so it must have got thoroughly chilled. Before that, it had been let for a few months to an RAF man and his wife. They must have been heavy smokers and not very careful, for some of our furniture had burn marks where the lighted cigarettes must have rested. It was a wonder the house had not caught fire.

It was not possible to take seaside holidays during the war as the beaches were covered with rolls of barbed wire in case of invasion by enemy forces. Instead we went on a number of fishing trips. Most of these were to Edenbridge along the river banks. Dad knew a farmer who allowed us to fish from his land. We usually had the place to ourselves and it was quiet and peaceful. My fishing rod was a cane and a piece of fine string, on which was tied a small hook. Jennifer and Christopher had the same. I slithered down the river bank and used stepping stones to stand on a large boulder. I was the first to catch a fish on one particular occasion, much to Dad's amazement, as he had more sophisticated equipment. On trudging back to our car on another day, we found a marvellous mushroom. It must have weighed a couple of pounds and was the size of a teaplate. I do remember one fateful fishing trip we had. It started off badly by Chris – who was about five years old at the time – getting a hook stuck in the palm of his hand. It took Dad a lot of fiddling before – much to the relief of us all – he got it out. On our return home we had to stop several times as Jennifer felt sick – in fact she was sick. We had had a picnic lunch of sandwiches and fruit, and something had obviously not agreed with her. To cap it all, a bee flew down Dad's shirt and he nearly lost control of the car. Not a very good day out!

Much talk went on about food rationing and there were endless talks on the radio and in magazines on how to survive on very little. As we only had about two ounces of butter each a week, our tea was often called bread and scrape. Although we had many shortages of one thing or another, I do not remember ever feeling starved. Hungry, yes. Things such as pineapples and bananas – which of course came from abroad – disappeared from the shops for the duration of the war.

My Dad, in his wisdom, decided that we should keep chickens – a rooster for breeding and then to be fattened up for Christmas, and a number of hens to supply eggs. Dad constructed a hen run at the end of the garden. He covered the thing with wire netting. He also made a hen house with nests jutting out at the back and these could be opened to ensure easy collection of any eggs. Chickens can be fun. I had always wanted to see a chicken lay an egg, so after school I used to spend hours watching the chickens. Whenever one sat in a nest, I opened the back and watched. On three occasions I saw an egg laid. A chicken always stands up to lay its egg and that is when you catch the magic moment. It happens so quickly. The egg comes out like a lump of jelly and sets almost immediately. Mum used to preserve any eggs we did not use straight away in a substance called isinglass. We fed our chickens on scraps and grit, and all our vegetable peelings were boiled up each week in an old black saucepan and stirred with a big metal spoon. The smell was just awful. Whenever we had a broody hen, Dad would set her on a clutch of fertilised eggs and hope for the best. I loved it when they hatched out. I watched chicks peck themselves out of their shells. They are beautiful little bundles of fluff. When one or two eggs appeared slow to hatch, we put them in a warm oven to help them along, although of course at times they proved to be addled.

I loved coming home from school to a hot dinner. I never knew what it would be. All food tasted good to me. Mum varied our meals a lot. One day it could be tripe and onions, another could be an oxtail casserole – the tail cut up into small sections. Sausage and mash was lovely and so was liver and bacon. Another favourite was meat pie. Everything was home-made. We always finished the meal with a pudding. It could be a steamed or boiled pudding in the winter and in the summer fresh stewed fruit and custard or an occasional jelly. Breakfast was either bread and milk or porridge, or maybe sometimes a boiled egg or fried egg and bacon. Although we were not well off, we had sufficient to eat.

Our Auntie Kit from Surbiton had an evacuee from the East End of London during the war – a little girl of about six or seven years old who came from the slums and who was half-starved. She had never slept in a bed before. At home her family slept on the floor with their coats over themselves. She sat at my Aunt's table not knowing what to do with knives, forks and spoons and when one day they had stewed plums, she threw the stones on the floor under the table. Poor girl, one day she would have to go back to her slum. It would be a lot worse for her then, knowing what life could really be like.

One of my favourite occupations when I was a little older was reading. I had progressed from picture and pop-up books to fairy stories. I loved anything to do with elves, gnomes and the like. *The Water Babies* was one of my favourites. We had inherited some books called *The Olive Fairy Book*, *The Brown Fairy Book* and *The Blue Fairy Book*. Doubtless there were others. There were fairy stories from all around the world in those books and each story was accompanied by a lovely

illustration, sometimes in colour and sometimes in black and white. As I grew older *Robin Hood*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Black Beauty* became my favourites, followed by *Little Women* and *Lorna Doone*. Books we read at school included *Children of the New Forest* and *The Black Tulip*. I sometimes tried to write short stories myself. I also had a go at writing poetry. Mum had written short stories when we were quite young. She had several published in children's books and the payment of three to five guineas per story must have come in very handy at the time.

A funny episode happened to one of Mum's friends, which she loved to relate. Her friend had a small baby who had not been too well. She was asked to take a specimen of the baby's urine to her doctor. Bottles and containers of any sort were becoming increasingly short during the war. In fact you were asked to return empty medicine bottles to the chemist. Anyway, Mum's friend found a small empty whisky bottle and so she put the baby's water in it. She placed the bottle at the foot of the baby's pram and set off for her appointment. On her way down the High Street, she was stopped by a Canadian soldier – quite a few were stationed in and around Caterham. He asked if he could purchase the small bottle of whisky – it was in such short supply. Mum's friend was too embarrassed to tell him what was really in the bottle, so she just said it was not for sale. Imagine her surprise, when after coming out of a shop, having left the baby outside, the sight of a ten shilling note greeted her where the bottle had lain. She looked up and down the High Street but no soldier was in sight. She was sure she would recognise him but all through the war she never met him again.

As I was a shy child, Mum decided it would be good for me if I joined a local club. As I had always been keen on playing nurse, and indeed had been given a little nurse's outfit one Christmas, I was encouraged to join the St. John Ambulance cadets. I did not like it at first. There were one or two nasty girls in the group, but after a while I was able to cope with them. One of these girls constantly trod on my feet. I was wearing a pair of suede clogs. They were not entirely new. As items of clothing were short during the war, shops were set up called *The Clothing Exchange*. There was one in Caterham. You could take along anything to exchange, even toys. Our first lesson was in first aid to the war injured. You then went on to the next course, which was home nursing, followed by a gas attack course, then crafts. I liked our instructors, who were Miss Neave and Miss Baker. We were supplied with a grey uniform with white armbands. We were expected to go on church parades and on one occasion, in Redhill, we paraded with all the other St. John groups in Surrey and were presented to Princess Marina, who at that time was President of the Association.

A Christmas party was held for us that year (1942) and much to my surprise I was given a parcel which had been made up by my counterpart in America. Ten parcels from the Junior Red Cross in Iowa had been sent as a goodwill gesture.

Unfortunately there were more girls than parcels and those who were not selected to receive one included one of the 'nasty' girls. She cajoled the others to give her at least one item from their parcels, but I refused, saying I was not going to open mine until I arrived home. Inside my parcel was an assortment of gifts and the one I liked best was a paint box. The colours in it were of brilliant hues, the like of which I had never seen before. Also, tucked away in the parcel, was the name and address of the girl who had put the contents in the box. I wrote a letter of thanks and received a reply in February 1942.

Senior Schooldays

After returning to Caterham in early 1942, I found it rather difficult to settle back at school. As I was nearly 13 years old, I was put into the senior school. It was age not ability that decided the issue. I was put in Mrs. McCathey's class. She was middle-aged, as were the other teachers. Most of the younger ones had gone off to war. Mrs. McCathey was a stout grey-haired lady and had the habit of crossing her arms across her ample bosom. Her booming voice kept the class in order. She was a fair teacher, but was also strict. Disruptive boys, such as Derek Neal or Ray Miles were soon put in their place. Derek liked to pull the hair of certain girls. It was the fashion to grow pigtails or plaits as they were called. How I longed to grow them myself. Unfortunately my hair just refused to grow. I was just beginning to get interested in my own hair, but as it was very fine and totally straight, it was difficult to do anything with it. I did manage to roll some hair on the top of my head and put some clips in to hold it, but after the head inspector described them as two sausages, I quickly lost interest and had to be content with a conventional fringe.

Apart from our class teacher, we went to others for specialised lessons in music, art, dressmaking, cookery and physical education.

Music classes were run by Miss Sandiford. It was just singing – we had no musical instruments. We learned parrot-fashion the songs of Percy Grainger and several other composers. One of our class, Joyce Sargent, could play the piano, so while she accompanied us, Miss Sandiford wielded her baton. She was a small, neat little lady who always looked as though she was in another world. She owned a Saluki-type dog. At weekends the pair of them could be seen trotting along the road at the same pace. On occasions she would allow one of the class to walk the dog – usually it was Derek Neal.

Our art teacher was Mr. Basson. He was a tall, thin, quiet man. We got on well, as he knew I was interested in the subject. He was a talented artist himself and he did a lovely pen-and-ink drawing in my autograph book. Every child had an autograph book – they were the 'in' thing. We all competed against each other to get as many

entries as possible. Every relative and friend had to contribute. It could be a poem, drawing or saying. I had an assortment in my book. My sister, Jennifer, started writing to film stars, mostly American, asking for their autographed photographs. She did receive quite a few, but were they really signed by the stars themselves?

Next to the art room was the sewing room. Miss Jones was in charge. We noticed that Mr. Basson often paid a visit and very soon everyone realised that a romance was blooming. I could not see the attraction. She was quite nice-looking, I thought, behind her horn-rimmed spectacles, but she had an acid tongue and bad temper. If she became annoyed with me, I started to do silly things. On my first attempt at using a sewing machine to make a pillowcase, I failed to line up the needle correctly and consequently it broke. Needles were in short supply as the factories were making components for the war. I was told I was a stupid girl. My next effort was a baby's dress. I was given the pattern and a piece of white organdie. It was beautiful material. After cutting out, I completed the back, which was in four sections – two yoke pieces and two skirt pieces with a split down the centre-back for fastenings. I showed it to Miss Jones, who said 'complete the front the same'. Not daring to go back to confirm that this was what she really meant, I cut down the front of the dress. Pondering on my action, I returned to the front of the class and, with a wail of despair, Miss Jones told the whole class that I must be absolutely dense. Who could be so silly as to cut down the front of the dress. To cover my mistake, we had to join the front of the dress with an inch-wide piece of organdie, mitred at the bottom. Eventually I embroidered French knots round the edge of this and also at the bottom of the short sleeves. When we had an exhibition of our work at the end of term, one of the Mums said she liked the baby's dress with the embroidered front. I caught a very wry smile and a caustic remark from Miss Jones.

Cookery was combined with laundry classes. We did them on alternate weeks. Most of us girls, who included June Gledhill, Joan Stevens, Doreen Clayton, Ruth Becket and June Furneaux, hated the laundry side of it. We washed a cotton garment brought from home by hand with solid soap. When rinsed we put the article through the mangle and dried it on a line in front of the furnace. When dry, we used flat irons, which were very heavy and you had to pick them up very carefully with padded cloths to protect yourself from being burned. It was always very hot in this room, which was upstairs in a separate building from the main school

Cookery classes, for girls only, were much nicer and we were able to take home the things we cooked. Mostly we made things which were baked in the gas ovens – cakes, biscuits, bread and the like. Miss Hoskins, the cookery teacher, had only just been appointed. She was not like her predecessor, who was quiet and small. You could not ignore the booming voice of Miss Hoskins, nor her commanding

stature like a war general. On one occasion two or three girls were accused of stealing a bag of dried fruit and were soon marched off to the headmaster. Funnily enough, she took some of us in 'after-school' classes and her whole attitude seemed different, softer somehow. The classes were to help us make things for ourselves or as presents that cost next to nothing. I brought an old black felt hat of Mum's to school. It was a close-fitting hat, and after cutting off the brim, I sewed a bright red bias binding round the bottom edge. To finish the hat, I sewed small dots of felt over the crown. Miss Hoskins was suitably impressed, but I was terribly annoyed when one of the other girls copied my idea. For my next effort I brought to school a long piece of pink shantung material, in order to cover some wooden coathangers. Miss Hoskins refused to let me use it, saying it was far too beautiful to be cut up for this purpose, so I turned my hand to making some brooches. They were not my own idea, but I enjoyed making them and they were popular as presents. You needed large curtain rings. A long thread of wool was needed to buttonhole-stitch all around the ring. You then worked or wove a lattice up and across the ring until it was all filled in, and then you embroidered in wool either flowers or even a little scene. It was completed with a safety-pin sewn on the back for attaching to a garment.

Our physical education was conducted by Miss Brain, a heavy-moving lady, whom I suspect was never cut out for the job. She made it very competitive and we all wore banners, either red, yellow, blue or green. Each colour had a team leader. I was not a keen sportsgirl and was very nervous of doing somersaults, handstands and the like. Some classmates managed to get excused when they had coughs or other ailments. I never seemed to be ill on the right days and so I was unable to have any excuses when I needed them. I was always nervous of the wooden horse we had to jump over, even though we had assistance. One day, one of the girls lost her footing, fell on her arm and broke it. She turned as white as a sheet and nearly fainted. The trouble was, it seemed to have a knock-on effect, and everyone else felt ill. Miss Brain quickly hurried the girl away to the school nurse.

While in Mrs. McCathey's class, I began to notice that boys were different. They also began to show an interest in me. I started finding little notes in my desk which were unsigned. I was eventually informed by someone that a boy by the name of Russell Howarth, was putting them there. I was annoyed. I would much rather they had been from Donald Howard, whom I quite liked. Russell was such a small and insignificant boy. Ray Miles was always trying to swap things with me. I had something he coveted. It was a card with a woman's profile printed on it. There were no features. You made your own, by shaking a small chain attached from the forehead to the neck. It was amazing how many different faces you could make. I was offered a chicken's leg in exchange – you could pull the claw up and down with the hamstrings which were exposed. I declined the offer. In class we were reading *Children of the New Forest*. There is a character in it called Phoebe. For

some reason I do not know what, Ray began to call me Phoebe and so did some of the other children. We all had – in turn – to stand up and read a passage from the book. Every time the name Phoebe cropped up, the whole class began to laugh. Poor Mrs. McCathy did not know what to make of it. Another book we all had to read from was *The Black Tulip*. We read this several times in fact, so that most of us knew it by heart.

Another boy I liked was Alan Lyles, and one day he asked me to meet him after school in the Park by the cricket pavilion. We sat on the picket fence laughing and chatting. When I bragged to Mum that I had a boyfriend, I was not expecting her reaction. She told me that I was far too young to be thinking about boys, and I was not to meet anyone again without her prior knowledge and consent. Furthermore, she pumped me for his name, address, age and what class he was in. The friendship died a natural death anyway.

Visits in 1942

In the early months of 1942, I had realised that all was not well with Granny Hunt – in fact she looked very sick. Her two evacuees had gone back home to London as she was too ill to look after them now. In the early spring I came home from school one day and Mum told me that Granny Hunt had died. I felt very sad, but I did not cry. I said nothing to Dad when we came face to face. I thought it would be better to act as normally as possible. I never ever saw Dad upset, but he had obviously been crying a lot, as his eyes were very red-rimmed. We children were not taken to the funeral – only adults attended. Granddad Hunt became very miserable in the months that followed, and Dad tried to make it easier by visiting him at least once in the week, and then on Sundays Granddad came to dinner with us. Mum still kept in touch with Vera, the cook from Bletchingley House, who was by now married to a Canadian and they had a baby girl. Vera was looking for lodgings in the area whilst her husband was stationed in Bletchingley and so she came to live with baby Elizabeth at Granddad Hunt's cottage for a few months. They were company for each other, although I know Granddad was very upset because the baby broke many of his precious china ornaments.

After a few months, Vera's husband was transferred elsewhere so she and baby Elizabeth found new lodgings in Heathfield, Sussex. When they had settled in, Jen and I were invited to take it in turns to spend a week there. It was towards the end of the summer. It was a pretty village, with just a small High Street of shops and houses. Vera's lodgings were with the local coal merchant. The house was large and Victorian. Vera had two very large rooms, one on the ground floor and an attic bedroom, where all three of us slept. I found it difficult to get to sleep sometimes, as we were right next door to the cinema. A cowboy film was obviously being shown the week I was there. After the first night I knew exactly

when the fights were and when to expect the noise of ricocheting bullets. I could hear men's voices shouting, but could never quite make out what they were saying.

The coal merchant and his wife had one 17 year-old short and pretty daughter. She had a Canadian boyfriend and every time he came to the door she threw her arms round him in a passionate embrace. Vera was appalled. She thought the girl was far too young to be throwing herself at this not-so-young man. He was maybe 20 years older than she was, or so it seemed. I enjoyed my week there. We had some lovely meals, Vera being such an excellent cook. I played quite a lot with Elizabeth, who was about a year old. When she was asleep, I was sent along to the local shops, maybe to the post office or bakers – their Chelsea buns were delicious and we ate them at once if they were still hot from the oven. There were some pleasant country walks round the village. A lot of flowers grew on the railway embankment, but Vera was not too happy if I crossed the lines to pick a bunch – suppose a train came round the bend.

Dad came down at the end of my week at Heathfield and brought Jen with him for her turn to stay.

Our next trip away from home was only six miles away, at Reigate. Again we took it in turns. Aunt Marie and Uncle Bert – as we called them – were no relation at all, although their surname was the same as ours. They were old friends of Gran and Granddad Snook, and, like them, had been in 'service' all their lives. Aunt Marie was the cook up at the 'house', so again we always had lovely meals. Uncle Bert was the chauffeur – a quiet little man with a twinkle in his eye. Aunt Marie made up for his quietness. She never stopped talking. What amazed me was that she did not seem to breathe. The words kept tumbling out and even if she was working in her kitchen by herself, her voice could be heard above the clatter of pots and pans. Not a quiet person at all, but so kind-hearted and friendly. She had a round happy face, her black hair framing her white powdered cheeks. She loved playing cards and took me along to many of her whist drives.

Unfortunately the lodge they lived in was like an ice box. I hated to complain, but one winter's night I was so cold in my makeshift bed that I could not sleep. I thought I would have to say something, and when I did Aunt Marie was horrified. Why had I not told her before? The next night I had an extra blanket and a hot water bottle.

Whenever the owners of this estate were away, which was quite frequently, we had the freedom of walking round the vast grounds. I liked one particular wood. Hidden in it was a small lake. It fascinated me. It was so dark and silent there. I expected any minute to see gnomes and fairies leaping about. One summer day we were caught in a thunderstorm there. It was so dark, it was like night. The noise in the trees and the water swirling about seemed like magic. It had been a hot and

sticky day, but now it was pouring. I only had a cotton sunsuit on, and it was soaked in no time. By the time we reached the lodge, the sun was shining and it seemed a different world.

Aunt Marie liked films, and often took me to the cinema in Reigate. We always sat in the best seats. I loved Errol Flynn in *Gentleman Jim*, a story of boxing. This friendly little cinema was nothing like the cinemas in Croydon. *The Davis* was a grand affair. It was enormous and the reception area alone was very impressive, with its circular marble floor flanked by large pillars that went on up to the next floor. Two ticket offices stood on each side of the main door into the cinema itself. If you could afford the top-price tickets of 3s.6d you were seated at the back and sitting on red plush seats. In the middle it cost 2s.3d and right at the front 1s.9d. The front two or three rows were awful as you were far too near the screen and I found it difficult to focus. In the 1940s Mum, Jean, Chris and I, with the Woodhouse family, queued at *The Davis* for nearly two hours to get in to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. We all loved the film and thought it was worth the wait. Christopher, who was around five years old at the time, made us all laugh because he preferred the wicked witch to Snow White.



Views of Caterham from a postcard

Occasionally in Caterham we would see a tramp. Usually in the spring they seemed to be on the move. I do not know where they went in the winter. It was said that one old man walked from London to the coast and back several times during the year. He smelt to high heaven. He sometimes spent several days in

Caterham before moving on. If I saw him coming, I crossed the road. It was not because I was afraid of him – it was just that I could not stand the smell. We had our own 'resident' tramp in Caterham. Her name was Mary Gasson. Rumour had it that she had been jilted at the altar and her mind had been affected. She was an awful sight, but quite harmless. She constantly muttered to herself as she roamed around pushing an old pram, in which were all her belongings. It just looked like a lot of old clothes and on top lay a battered old handbag. Funny thing was, although her hair was unkempt and her clothes tattered and torn, she did not seem to smell too badly. Perhaps it was because it was not unknown for her to have a bath in the local horse trough. Many was the time that a local policeman had to persuade her to remove her naked body and get dressed. She slept rough on either one of the park pavilion verandas or in bus shelters. In the winter, she often slept in some derelict cottages at the top of Park Road, but she had to find somewhere else later in the war as these cottages were pulled down to make room for a very large water tank. These round tanks were dotted around Caterham, and were to be used to hold an extra water supply in case of bad fires after bombing raids. Fortunately, the fire brigade never had to make use of them.

Also in 1942 I acquired a new friend by the name of Jean Maynard. She was the same age as I was. Her family had moved into the next road to ours. Her father was a policeman – just an ordinary country bobby. He was a quiet and non-aggressive man, not the type you really expect to be in the police force, though I think he was pretty strict with his children. There had been five daughters, but one had died as a baby. Jean was the second eldest. We did absolutely everything together. I called for her each morning, as her home was on the way to school. After coming out at 3.45 p.m. we would take it in turns to play in each other's gardens. We both had swings. On dry days we played with our whips and tops or played ball games. Tennis balls were used, but not for tennis. It was all the rage to juggle with them. You could either toss them in the air or against a wall – starting with two balls and working up to three. You were considered quite clever if you could control four balls. Another tossing game we played was five stones. These were cubes with sides about half an inch square, made of wood or plaster and ridged on the sides in order to pick them up more easily. There were a lot of variations, but the idea was to toss one up and pick one up from the ground at the same time, then two and so on. On wet days we just sat and talked with our families. Usually we parted company at about 5 p.m. so that we could listen to *Children's Hour* on the radio. Only on very light evenings were we allowed out after tea, and then we had to be in by 7.30 p.m.

We loved summer holidays, when we could go for picnics, either on our own or sometimes with Mum. Often, we picnicked with the Woodhouse family, as Jean's Mum was always far too busy, having a larger family. One of our other pursuits was fossil-hunting. We poked about the local gravel pits and one day I was lucky

enough to find half a fossilised sea urchin. On several occasions we came home with leaf fossils, which were taken to school for one of our projects. Mum became quite interested in the subject, so we began taking small trowels for digging. We acquired a shelf full of interesting pieces, which was a talking point for interested visitors.

By the time Jean and I had reached the age of 13, we had become good friends. She was the one who thought of things to do. Mostly we rode our bikes into the countryside and went for walks to pick flowers. One day she told me we were going for a walk on the Essendene estate to do something special. On the estate was a big house, which temporarily housed some Canadian soldiers. The grounds had been neglected and the undergrowth was thick and full of brambles. I tried to find out what we were doing there, but Jean said I should wait and see. After reaching a clearing, Jean dipped her hand in her pocket and produced a couple of cigarettes and a box of matches. Would I like to try one? I did. I was not quite sure what to do with the cigarette. After being told to light one end and draw breath on the other end at the same time, I had a go. I puffed away two or three times, but as far as I was concerned, it just left a nasty taste in my mouth. Knowing we were too young to smoke, she made me promise not to tell anyone. She said her father would go mad if he found out. We both sucked sweets before we went home, in case our parents could smell the smoke.

My old infants' teacher, Miss Noble, was now married and had moved into the house right opposite to Jean's home. She was giving piano lessons and Mum persuaded me to join. Lessons cost 3s.0d per hour and so I went once a week. I was not keen to go, as I had always disliked the teacher. She was all smiles when talking to my mother, but as soon as Mum left, her grim strict attitude returned. I did not enjoy the lessons, but I was determined to play and so I practised hard on our piano at home.

Doodlebugs overhead

1943 passed without many changes in my life and before I knew it we were into 1944, which was quite an eventful year for me and the world.

In the spring we were aware of a lot of military activity in our area. If you stood in the churchyard, you could look across the valley to the other side. Caterham by-pass ran along there, but was now closed to the public. Something must be happening soon. On the by-pass, you could see row by row of army vehicles and tanks. They must be making ready for a coming battle. One night at the beginning of June, all these vehicles disappeared. It wasn't until the 'D-Day' landings in France were announced that we realised what was going on. Our parents and their friends seemed very happy at the turn of events.

However, by early summer, the war was hotting up around us again. This time it was in the form of pilotless aeroplanes called Doodlebugs (*the VIs*). They were launched from the continent and aimed at London. They were flying bombs. When the fuel ran out their engines cut out and they would drop to the ground, exploding on impact and causing a lot of deaths and damage. As we lived near Kenley aerodrome a lot of barrage balloons were placed in the sky, their chains dangling in order to stop enemy aircraft getting through to London. Some Doodlebugs fell short of their target, and one weekend one fell a couple of roads away from our house. There was a terrific explosion and the next thing we knew was that we had lost several panes of glass from the front of the house, the front door had been blown off and lumps of plaster came crashing down from the ceiling onto the dining room table. All of us were in a state of shock. Mum came rushing down the stairs, having left her sick bed. I did not know what was wrong with her, but she made a very quick recovery. I was pouring out a cup of tea at the moment of the explosion but did not drop the teapot. After clearing up the debris, Dad had to board the windows up until such time as we could get more glass, which was in short supply. I think this event and several other near-misses around us, prompted Mum and Dad to send us off to the country again. This time it was to be to Somerset.

Summer in Somerset

Uncle Jack Treasure from Godstone had a sister-in-law who lived in the village of Wanstrow, Somerset. She ran the village shop and post office. She had no room herself for three children, but she knew someone who would possibly take us in. Another adventure was about to begin.

In early July, it was decided that Mum would take us three children to Somerset on the train. Clothes for all of us were packed into one suitcase and poor Mum had to carry it. We started our journey very early in the morning. We had to travel up to London on the Southern Railway and get across London to Paddington Station and the Great Western Railway. Our journey was to Bristol, where we would have to get a local train to Wanstrow, our destination. We had never been to Paddington before. Everything seemed to be on a huge scale. The station was full of Canadian soldiers, some of whom travelled to Bristol with us. One, in fact, was very kind and helped Mum onto the train with our heavy suitcase. He seemed fascinated by Jennifer, who, by all accounts, reminded him of his wife back home in Canada. As our journey progressed, I noticed that the smoky terraced houses were getting fewer and fewer and then occasionally I would spot big factories on the outskirts of London, their chimneys belching out a lot of smoke. As we travelled into the west country you could see and feel the difference. The grass was lush and a vivid green. We raced past little hamlets and everywhere there were fields of cows

grazing. I was quite enthusiastic about it all, but Mum seemed irritated and unusually quiet. I think she was going to miss us. It was back to noise again when we arrived at Bristol. What a busy station! Trains seemed to be going in all directions. Whilst we were sitting on a seat waiting for our local train, a large engine decided to run up beside us. Its sheer size fascinated me. Its driver seemed to be testing everything. Jets of steam shot out of the side, level with the platform, a whistle blew, gauges were tapped. The engine rolled forward a few yards and back again, presumably to test the brakes. After a lot of stoking up, it eventually pulled away, the driver and fireman looking suitably sweaty and black.

Our small one-carriage train soon arrived and we were off once again, taking a small two-line track and then onto a single track to Wanstrow. We were the only people to get off onto the single platform. Apart from the stationmaster, the place was deserted. Not a car nor a person was in sight. After asking directions, we had to walk half a mile into the village. We were all tired and Mum struggled with the suitcase. Our journey had taken all day and we were ready to drop.

Having found the right cottage, which was in the middle of a block of three, we knocked on the door. None of us knew what to expect. After a couple of minutes the door opened and there in the tiny porch stood a tall elderly lady attired all in black. Her dress was long and only just cleared her ankles. She ushered us into the one and only living room which reminded me of a Victorian parlour. An antiquated sideboard stood on one side covered in all sorts of bric-a-brac. A sofa stood under the window and a large aspidistra in a jardinière looked cool in its dark place in the corner of the room. A heavy round table took its place in the middle of the room, on which were some inviting-looking sandwiches and a plate of small cakes. After pleasantries were exchanged, Mrs. Barnes made us a cup of tea and we all sat round the table to eat. We were hungry and thirsty, as well as tired. Having finished tea, we were shown to the bedroom which we three children were to share, as it was only a two-bedroomed cottage. Jennifer and I shared a double bed and Christopher had a camp bed under the window which looked out over the street. Mum helped us unpack and removed a few things of her own as she was staying the night with Aunt Ethel, Uncle Jack's sister-in-law, who lived a little way down the road. For some reason, I chose the side of the bed that was pushed up against the wall. The bed had a feather mattress which was really comfortable, and I fell asleep in no time at all.

I must have slept soundly, as the next thing I remember was being woken and told it was time to get up. I helped Christopher dress as he was a bit slow. Where were we to wash? There was no bathroom. We were to use a special bowl kept under the kitchen sink. We had already discovered the toilet the night before. It was situated in the large shed across the courtyard. It was a good job it was summer time. I should hate to go out there in the winter. Breakfast was porridge, and so it was on most mornings. I discovered it was fatal to tell Mrs. Barnes that you liked

a particular item of food, as you got it for evermore. We said we liked junket, and so we had it every day except Sundays and then we usually had a plain suet duff with treacle.

That morning I was able to see what kind of person Mrs. Barnes was. She looked less severe, as her black outfit of the night before had been changed for a drab grey dress, over which she wore a working overall. Her hairstyle was severe, being drawn back into a bun at the back of her head. Her face was rather flabby. She had a fat bottom lip and her mouth turned down at the corners. I had a feeling she was not going to be too friendly. Apparently she had been widowed the year before. Her home town was Hull and she still had her northern accent. I never knew how she and her husband came to be living in this remote Somerset village, or if Mr. Barnes also came from the north. His name was only ever mentioned once, and that was to tell us that he gave all of his sweet ration to the four children who lived in the cottage opposite.

After our breakfast on the first day, Mum came to say good-bye. She kissed us all and told us that she and Dad would visit us next month, which was August. I was asked to make sure I kept an eye on Christopher, who was only six years old. Just as well I did, as we were left entirely to our own devices. Not that we came to any harm. The worst thing that I sustained was a wasp sting on my thumb, which swelled to twice its normal size. This was a good year for wasps. They were everywhere, indoors and out. A large apple tree stood by the back door and every apple had two or three wasps on it. I hurried past to get out of the way. The back garden was very long and narrow. Half way down there was an abandoned pigsty. It was quite clean and cosy inside and sometimes I sat on an old stool and did some drawings of nasturtiums and sweet peas that were growing in the garden. I bought my pad and crayons from Aunt Ethel's shop. Each week while we were in Wanstrow, Granny Snook would write us a letter and enclose some postage stamps which she said we could exchange for money at the post office. Aunt Ethel was quite shocked and said this was against the law. She would, however, purchase them from us personally and so get round it that way. We had no pocket money, so it was a useful arrangement.

On fine days we explored the area. Our cottage had a small front garden which backed straight onto a side road, which was off the main road that skirted the village. Our road had a few cottages on either side, the shop-cum-post office, and a chapel opposite, then came a small farmyard. Cows from there were driven further down the road to nearby fields, so you had to tread carefully in order to miss all the cow-pats. There was a downward slope to a stream at the bottom with a footpath and bridge, and then over to the right was a lovely old house and working farm owned by elderly Mr. & Mrs. James. What a couple of country characters they were. Full of fun and friendliness, very different from dour Mrs. Barnes. As you rounded the bend in the road you came across two semi-detached

farm cottages, which were occupied by Mr. & Mrs. Baker. Young Mrs. Baker was the most energetic person I ever met. She already had four children and another was on the way. As their family grew, they took over the cottage next door when it became empty. The cottages were very primitive. No water was laid on. A well was near the back door. Whereas I always thought you lowered a bucket gently down a well, I soon realised that it would just float on the surface of the water. The trick was to throw the bucket in upside-down with all the force you could muster and haul it up again when it was three-quarters full, with the rope that was attached to the handle. You then had to replace a very heavy piece of wood which covered the wellhead. If a child fell down there it would mean certain death. I reckon it was 30 or 40 feet deep.



Mr. James at Wanstrow

Electricity had only just come to them a short while previously. It was such a novelty that they tended to keep lights on when it was not necessary. Bare bulbs on a short flex hung down in every room. They could not afford lampshades yet.

Young Mrs. Baker must have had a hard life, but she never showed any signs of flagging. Her cottages were clean, though the furnishings were poor. Each cottage had one downstairs room and scullery, plus two bedrooms. One downstairs room was used as a dining room, the other as a sitting room. Furniture was very sparse and there were no floor coverings at all, just bare boards. There was no connecting door in the cottages, so you had to go out of the front door of one and into the front door of the other. There was no dividing fence, so it was really quite close. One of the sculleries was used entirely for the feeding of the family and the other was used for the preparation of food for the animals and also as a store for vegetables and fruit, that were all home-grown.

One of the strangest things I ever saw happened in this scullery. One of the many chickens that wandered around had a problem. Its egg-laying parts were hanging

outside the body, in other words it had a prolapse. Mrs. Baker tied the hen's legs together and hung her upside down on the indoor clothes line and with needle and thread proceeded to sew the offending parts back into place. I stood in amazement and admiration as I watched this amateur surgery. No noise came from the poor hen and after an hour or so she was let down and off she scuttled. After two or three days the stitches were removed and the hen started laying normally again.

The family's milk supply came from Mr. James' farm. I am sure the family were very poor, but self-sufficient. All the children were happy little things. They ran around all day bare footed. I suspect that they did not own any shoes. The eldest child was about seven years old and the youngest barely two. Mrs. Baker could only have been in her mid-twenties, I would only guess. Everyone called her Joan and so did I. She had straight dark hair that framed her small oval face, and like her children she was always smiling. Mr. Baker was a dedicated farm hand who worked very hard. For all their hardships, they seemed a happy and contented family.

After we had been in Wanstrow for a couple of weeks, we had a letter from Mum saying that Maureen, the youngest daughter of her friend Mrs. Woodhouse, would be coming to stay in the village. Mrs. James had a small spare bedroom, so Maureen would be going there. I was rather put out by this information. That was the one place I would have liked to have stayed at myself, but of course there was not enough room for the three of us. Anyway, we came down to the farm every day and on sunny days played in the fields or sat on the haywain eating apples. Besides the many cows, there were numerous chickens. We sometimes had the job of collecting the eggs. Quite a few of the hens refused to lay in the hen house, preferring instead sheltered places under the hedges. We got to know their favourite spots, though they were well disguised. A few geese wandered around the yard and they were quite vicious. Christopher was attacked one day by one of them. Fortunately for him, he was carrying a hefty stick and hit the goose on top of the head. In no time at all the goose developed a large lump, which must have given it a headache. We steered clear of the geese whenever possible. They were very large birds and towered over Chris. Their threatening behaviour made us all a little nervous.

I loved to go inside the farmhouse. It was very old and most adults had to duck going through the doorways. Their typical farm kitchen had the usual very heavy table and chairs. Around the walls were other pieces of hefty furniture, on which were placed containers, many of which were stone jars containing salt, flour, sugar etc. A large earthenware bowl containing cream was covered with a muslin cloth. Such a mixture of smells, some natural like fresh milk and some of home cooking like bread and cakes! The oven was in fact in the next room. A large range was always alight whatever the weather. It was sweltering in there on hot summer days. A small table on which were pot plants was pushed up by the window and

the chintzy curtains added to the cosiness of this small room. A latched door in the corner led to the staircase. Maureen's bedroom was downstairs and you looked into the cowshed from the window. Cows would come right up and peer through at us. Mr. James Senior had a real weather-beaten face and a droopy moustache. It was a job to understand him sometimes, as he had a very strong Somerset accent. Mrs. James was short, fat and rounded, and had a jolly laugh. She was always spoiling us with titbits from her kitchen. Their big fat fluffy cat looked envious. Other cats, which were there to keep the mice down, roamed about but rarely came indoors, preferring to sleep in the barn.

It seemed very sunny that summer, so we spent a lot of time outdoors. Remembering our picnics back in Caterham, we asked for permission to have our tea in the fields as often as possible. I was quite irritated by the first picnic we had. Whilst Maureen was supplied with fresh bread and strawberry tarts with thick double cream, we three were eating sliced bread and stale Lyons Madeira cake. As we were always hungry we ate anything, but resentment was building up inside me. It did not seem fair that Maureen was living off the fat of the land and we three were not. Mrs. James did give us a pat of fresh home-made butter one day, but we found out later that Mrs. Barnes sold it to her employer. Mrs. Barnes did a few hours general help in the big house, which was just up the road next to the school.

During August Mum and Dad paid us a visit. In fact they stayed for the weekend with Joan Baker and her family. They arrived by train on the Friday night and went back on the Sunday. It was a tearful good-bye from me. I was getting homesick, but we had to stay as the war was still going on around home.

It was getting near harvest time now and we loved to ride on the back of tractors or sit on the ricks when we were allowed to do so. The trouble was that there were a lot of horseflies around. They always seemed to bite me and ignore the others. We became friendly with three boys whose father also had a farm in the village. Ted Cox and his brothers, Francis and Roy, were a bit older than we were. They knew all there was to know about farming and were cocky with it too. However, we liked them as they were good fun and were always inviting us to take part in farm activities such as stooking or raking.

By the end of August we three were getting the distinct impression that Mrs. Barnes was getting fed up with us. We were forever being reminded that her own two nieces, Hilary and Valerie, helped their mother with household chores all the time and so we girls must do more. I must admit that I sneaked off to practise on the piano next door when it was washday. I was not keen on the idea of standing scrubbing clothes at Mrs. Barnes' dolly tub. She informed us one day that we must help the war effort and so she obtained some pink wool and patterns from the Red Cross and we each proceeded to make a blanket for some poor baby. I quite liked

knitting, so my blanket grew quickly. Each evening after tea, which was usually bread and jam and Lyons Madeira cake, I picked up my knitting and did a few rows. The wool was a lovely shade of pink and the pattern for the shawl was lacy with a moss stitch border. I felt proud of my finished effort and could just imagine a tiny baby wrapped up in it. Unfortunately Jennifer soon tired of knitting her shawl and left it lying on a chair for days on end. Mrs. Barnes was quick to notice and enquired as to why it had not been touched recently. She kept on and on about it and in the end reduced Jennifer to tears. Mrs. Barnes said she would stand for no excuses and that Jennifer would not be allowed out to play in the evenings until the shawl was completed. This time my sister had to comply, and although she had to be reminded every evening, it was eventually finished.

Our meals with Mrs. Barnes left a lot to be desired. One Sunday dinner, in particular, I shall never forget. At first I thought I was seeing things. The meat was moving on my plate. A closer look revealed that there were a lot of small maggots crawling about. I was horrified and panic set in. What should I do? I nearly shouted out. Instead I kicked my sister under the table and hoped that she would realise something was wrong, but it had no effect. I looked at Mrs. Barnes. Dare I say something? No, I did not have the courage. I pushed the meat to one side of my plate and left it. The voice of Mrs. Barnes asking me to eat up my meat made me shudder, but still I could say nothing. Surely she would not be eating it herself if she knew the truth. When everyone had finished, I jumped up from the table and collected the plates and took them into the kitchen. I quickly deposited my leftovers in the waste bucket. A startled Mrs. Barnes said nothing, but the rest of that joint ended up in the same bucket. I suspected this meat was some that had been left over from the big house where Mrs. Barnes worked. It had been previously cooked and put on our plates cold, with hot gravy poured on it. I kept asking myself questions, such as how long do maggots take to hatch out and had this meat been very old and were we all going to be ill tomorrow? However, we all seemed OK the next day. Nobody ever mentioned the subject, but I would never forget it.

During our stay in Somerset, a mysterious lady visitor came and knocked on the door on several occasions. We never knew who she was, as Mrs. Barnes stood and talked to her in the porch. Although the door was always closed, I caught snatches of their conversation. 'How are the children from London getting on?' and 'Are you able to manage?' Replies from Mrs. Barnes varied from 'Well I do discipline them' or 'I keep them in order'. I only ever caught sight of the lady once when she was leaving the front door. She was smartly dressed in a suit and hat. Was she checking up on us? I never found out.

Shortly after this last visit, Mrs. Barnes said that as it was coming up to September we must go to school. She instructed us to pay a visit to the headmistress of the local school and so all four of us (Maureen came too) trotted off to her house on

the outskirts of the village. A disagreeable thin faced middle-aged lady answered the door. My heart sank. I had not wanted to come in the first place. I was hoping that we would be going back to Caterham soon. She seemed irritated by our visit. It was obvious that she had been doing some washing. Her hands were white and wrinkled, due I thought to having had her hands immersed in water for a long time. 'What do you want?' she demanded. We asked if we could come to school in September when the term started. She said she could only take Christopher. She would arrange for Jennifer and Maureen to attend Shepton Mallet school and join the other evacuees down there. As I was already past 14 nobody would accept me, so I could go along with my brother and help with jobs at her school. With that she closed the door.

Mrs. Barnes' patience with us was getting shorter. We had a few minor mishaps, but what she called the 'final straw' was when Chris accidentally broke a small bedroom window. His bed was too close to it anyway and one day when he was messing about on his bed, his bottom went clean through it. What a tirade of abuse we got. We were all terrible children, and even our father was not much better. He had failed to empty her ashtray after using it on his last visit. I was now getting upset by our treatment and decided to write a letter home. I wanted my parents to hear the true facts. Mum replied saying that we must try to stick it out for a while longer and hopefully we would be able to come home well before Christmas.

In a way I felt that I would be glad when school started. Perhaps time would pass a little quickly. In the meantime we kept ourselves amused either on the farm or messing about in the stream that crossed the road at the bottom of the village. Just occasionally an army lorry would stop and a dozen or so young American soldiers standing or sitting in the back would chat to us. They were stationed nearby. One day one threw me an orange and asked if I knew the way to London!

As it was nearing September, we were able to go mushroom picking. You had to get up early to find the best ones, otherwise other villagers would beat you to it. There were many fields behind Mr. & Mrs. James' farm, and this was where we discovered the best mushrooms. We found so many one day that we had to carry them home in our hankies as well as the bag we had taken with us.

At last the school term arrived. Jennifer and Maureen had to leave early as they had to walk half a mile to the station and then take the two-carriage diesel train to Shepton Mallet, which was a couple of stops away. Other evacuees packed the train. Listening to accounts of their daily journey, it is a wonder anyone arrived in one piece. There were frequent fights amongst the boys, usually evacuees against the local lads. The girls were no better, arguing and larking about. Train windows were pulled up and down and children leaned in and out. No guard travelled on this little local train.

The stationmaster at Wanstrow, Mr. Luckins, had a dual role. He issued and collected tickets, for which he wore one hat. When a train arrived, he would change hats, dash out onto the platform with a flag, see everybody off and on the train, wave it off, go back into his office and change hats again. In between trains, he would tend the garden, or if it was raining do some office work. On Sundays Mr. Luckins had a different job. He was the preacher at the chapel. All the village trooped into his chapel at harvest festival time. At the end of the service the fruit and vegetables were auctioned off. It was fun to watch grey-haired Mr. Luckins, who always seemed to be dashing about, wringing money out of people who seemed not to want to part with it. After all, he said, it was going to a good cause – his chapel.

Wanstrow School was a very short distance from Mrs. Barnes' house. It took about five minutes to walk there. I accompanied Christopher on that first day of school. We walked up to the cross-roads, straight across, then passed the largest conker tree I had ever seen. We passed through the small iron school gate and then entered the school itself. The headmistress greeted us. Every child was already seated and how they stared at Chris and me. There two classrooms, which ran side by side and you could only enter the second classroom by a connecting door from the first, which was always left open. I suddenly realised what a difficult job Mrs. Sharp had. She was the only teacher, and she had to look after two separate classes. I began to feel sorry for her and made up my mind to help as much as possible.

In the far room were the five to eight year-olds and the nine to twelve year-olds were in the first room. Over-twelves went to school in Shepton Mallet. Chris, obviously, was put in the far room and that is where I was instructed to stay. My duties were to hand out books and pencils, chalks and slate, and write tables – which Mrs. Sharp hoped I knew – on the blackboard. I was also expected to keep some sort of discipline. I found it very hard and was glad when the first day was over. I thought it would get easier as time went by, but every day had its problems, not least my small brother who expected special attention from me. When he did not receive it, he made my life difficult by being generally naughty. If we were having an individual reading lesson, he would refuse to take part and I knew that he could read the very simple words in the books we had at our disposal. He played quite well with the other children, but I knew he was not happy there and sometimes he burst into tears for no apparent reason. I think he was homesick, like me, and so instead of being cross with him I would try to mother him instead.

How much longer would we have to say in Wanstrow? Mum wrote that she hoped we would all be home soon, as the air-raids were decreasing. It could not be soon enough for me. I hoped that it would be before Christmas. Sometimes on a Saturday Jen, Chris, Maureen and I would all walk to the station and catch the train to Frome. Perhaps we would go once a month, when we had saved the fare, which

was only a few bob. I had to pretend I was only 13, otherwise you paid adult fare if you were 14 or over.

We loved to walk down Cheap Street in Frome. A gully ran down the middle of the narrow sloping street in which a constant stream of water trickled. The street was not much wider than an alley really, with little shops running down each side. In a small stationers I saw a small calendar I liked. It had a picture of an owl on it. I made up my mind that I would buy it for Mum as a Christmas present. I wanted to buy it then and there, but it cost 1s.2d, which I did not have. The bottom end of Cheap Street opened onto the market square and then one passed down the High Street to the bottom, where the fast-flowing narrow river ran under a small bridge. It was hardly a river, more a wide stream. To the left of town was the cattle market. I loved watching the animals being auctioned. They were mostly pigs and sheep. Red-faced men talked in a language difficult to understand. They wore leather aprons over their rough woven shirts. These men stomped around the ring guiding their animals, while tweedy-looking farmers leaned on the metal bars of the pens, making their bids. The auctioneer made unintelligible noises, whilst the buyers used only sign language.

An older sister of Granny Snook lived at the other end of Frome, on Catherine Hill. She was Great Aunt Ginny to us, Ginny being a shortened name for Virginia. She was a widow, but we did not know for how long she had been so. Great Aunt Ginny was a prim and proper little lady. She was very like our own grandmother. She always wore black – even her outdoor coat and straw hat were black. She looked severe in her get-up, but she was really a kindly lady and she always welcomed us with open arms whenever we paid her a visit. In her little flagstoned garden, surrounded on all sides by a high wall, stood a cherry tree. Its branches reached out right across the very small garden. Every summer it bore a lot of fruit and we came away laden with cherries, cherry pies and jam.

Auntie Ginny's daughter also lived nearby. She was married to Uncle Dave, who worked at the local foundry which was only a stone's throw from their end-of-terrace cottage in Portway. Uncle Dave was a draughtsman and had worked at the foundry since the end of the First World War. He met Aunt Daisy whilst he was billeted on her mother during the war when he was in the army. They had one son, my cousin David. Whenever we kids came to Frome we would call at their house before going down to the shops, but more often than not nobody was in. I often wondered where they disappeared to. During the Second World War they had a strange young boy billeted on them. I am not sure how long he stayed. He was foreign, spoke very little English and he had a fiery temper. He thought nothing of picking up a knife and threatening people with it. He arrived mysteriously and he left just as mysteriously. Aunt Daisy believed he was a prince from some far-off land. She was told not to ask any questions about him.

Back to Caterham Again – 1944

In September 1944 we were informed that we were going home. I was very happy about this, but tried not to show it to Mrs. Barnes, whom I knew would be somewhat annoyed. Although I loved Wanstrow and the surrounding countryside, I had been very homesick and wanted to go home. We had been there barely three months, but it seemed a lifetime. As soon as we knew which day Mum was going to come down for us, we packed our suitcases ready to go home the next day. Our good-byes to Mrs. Barnes were brief and rather curt. No love was lost between her and us, and we all said good-bye and marched up the road to the station without so much as a backward glance. A long but uneventful journey saw us back at Caterham in the late afternoon.

Dad was pleased to see us and said it would good to have his chicks back home again. The first thing I did was to run down the garden. I had missed our garden. I spoke to the chickens, I looked at the vegetables in their neat little rows, inspected my own small patch of garden that I was allowed to work myself and even poked my head into the air-raid shelter. I was tired but happy and what bliss to sleep in my own bed once again, even if it did dip in the middle.

In October we returned to school. The head teacher was rather astonished that I should have returned, as I was now 14 plus. The school was still half empty owing to the war, and therefore they agreed that I could stay until Christmas when I could officially leave. What was I going to do with my life? I did not know. War was still raging in Europe. A new weapon, the V2 rocket, was being dropped on us now. How long was this war going on for? Maybe I would become old enough to join up. Dad acquired a large map of Europe from somewhere and we pinned it to our living room wall. We had little flags, either British or American, which we used to pinpoint the advance of the troops through Europe. Each day we moved the flags little by little, sometimes only one or two miles. The objective of Berlin seemed a long way off.

Christmas was coming up and my future was discussed. Several times I had talked about becoming a nurse. Unfortunately I was far too young to start training, 17 being the age at which you could begin as a probationer. Mum suggested a secretarial course, which she was willing to pay for. It would, she said, be something to fall back on if nursing did not materialise. After making some enquiries, Purley School of Commerce and Language was chosen as the best and nearest school. It was about four miles from home and on the main bus route.

An interview was arranged with the headmistress and Mum and I attended together. Miss Attwood was the typical spinsterish teacher. Short and sharp-featured, her wispy grey hair was pulled back in a neat bun. Her manner was very persuasive and I was talked into doing book-keeping, against my will as I

hated figure work, besides the shorthand and typing course. Although Mum and Dad had saved some money, they were not able to afford for me to go full-time and it was agreed that I could learn quite a lot in a year, attending in the morning only.

Our typing teacher was a lovely lady, but our shorthand teacher was less than nice. I obviously irritated her. I tried to be studious and got on with my work. First we had to learn the shorthand alphabet. I quietly worked at it and learned quickly. Miss Turner called me 'Miss Mouse'. She told me it was no good being a quiet little mouse if I wanted to get on in business. Her remarks hurt, but I was determined to ignore them, which made matters worse. Her face would go red with anger because I refused to respond. It is a wonder I learned it all, but I did, as I liked the idea of knowing another language. As I was a part-timer, I was given homework, so after the bus ride home, which took about 20 minutes, I was able to do the homework in the afternoons. At the end of the first term, my report read 'Miss Hunt has a basic knowledge of all three subjects' – surely the shortest of reports. I hated book-keeping, so I persuaded Mum to write to the headmistress to cancel these classes and then I was quite happy to continue with shorthand and typing.

— The Prize

One day, whilst I was doing some homework, there was a knock at the door and a young man was standing there telling Mum she had won £25 for guessing how many enemy planes had been shot down over England that week. What a lot of money! There was a snag. The money had to be spent on goods in Barkers Store in London, which meant paying fares to get there. Mum wanted us all to have a present, so it was decided that Dad would take a day off work and drive us up to London. We were all very excited at the prospect.

I found the big store awe-inspiring. After looking round several departments, I decided that I wanted a handbag. The one I chose was made of pigskin. It was very soft and dark brown. I adored it. It was pricey – £3 in fact – but Mum said I could have it. To start with Mum had been given a card with £25 credit, and as we visited each department the money we spent was deducted. Dad was happy with leather gloves, and for the home we chose a beautiful bone china teaset. Jennifer chose a present and Chris a toy. Mum said she would very much like a dress, so we all trooped up to the right department and admired the different ones she tried on. Her choice in the end was a long-sleeved crepe de chine creation in dusty pink. We ended up in the kitchen utensil department to spend the rest of the money. Here a crisis broke out. Someone had not deducted the right amount and we actually owed them £1.10s.0d or so. Could they take something back, Mum enquired? No they could not. Everything had been packaged and receipted. In the end Mum and Dad found they could just about scrape together the required

amount. What a day! We had some lovely things to take home, but it had cost Mum and Dad more than they anticipated in the extra cash and petrol etc. We were starving hungry, thirsty and tired when we arrived home, but we all agreed that the day had been well worth while.

Peace – 1945

By early spring of 1945 there were happier looking faces about. The war was drawing to a close. The Allies were getting closer to the Rhine and Berlin. Our little flags on the map were now in the suburbs of Berlin and then suddenly it was all over. A feeling of light-headedness came over me. I suppose I had been fearful of being bombed, but I never seriously thought any harm would come to my family. Not like Mrs. Martin round the corner, who lost her only son in the RAF, or Mrs. Hewitt in the next road, who also lost a son in the Forces. My relief was for silly little things like being able to put the lights on and not draw the curtains, or walking some distance without having to dive into the nearest air raid shelter. I had grown up in this war and was hopeful of the future. I thought of all the different kinds of foods we would be able to buy again. My brother Chris was six years old now, and had never seen a pineapple or a banana. I had not eaten an orange for five years, and funnily enough if you go without something for that length of time it does not bother you to start again.

My friend Jean was very happy that the war officially ended on her 15th birthday, which was 8th May 1945. Everyone in town was preparing to celebrate. Dad fished out some Christmas lights from the loft. He fixed together two pieces of wood in the shape of a 'V' for victory, attached the lights and then fixed them to the front of the house. Other neighbours followed suit, and the whole Avenue was lit up. On the evening of 8th May everyone was out and about and marching round the streets singing old favourites such as *Doing the Lambeth Walk* and *The White Cliffs of Dover*.

Children and adults alike joined in, although we had to stop on one occasion to look for Mrs. Francis's false teeth. They had fallen out whilst she was singing in her best Welsh voice. The next night someone organised a dance in the Avenue. Just in the bend of the road was a small green on which stood a large oak tree. Lights had been fixed in it, someone provided a portable gramophone and dancing in the road went on into the small hours. In the weeks to come other private celebrations went on and adults organised street parties for the children. Long trestle tables were placed in the road; they were covered with sheets and then goodies on top, the like of which I had not seen for several years. Apart from the sandwiches, there was actually jelly and tinned fruit. Some people must have been saving these lovely things for just such an occasion. There was even a cake with icing dripping down its sides.

Gradually the serious side of life began to return, and the familiar faces of young men I only vaguely remembered began to return home. Some would never come back, I knew that. Also strange war stories began to emerge, like the local lady whose first husband was reported killed at the beginning of the war. Three years later she remarried a Canadian soldier and he lost his life on the Normandy beaches in 1944. This grief-stricken lady was in for another shock because at the end of the war her first husband turned up. He had been taken captive and had been incarcerated in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp for the duration.



Birch Avenue Street Party – 1945

Brighton and Hove

As the summer of 1945 wore on, people started to take holidays again. Betty, my friend next door, had an aunt who lived in Hove. She was not really an aunt – not a blood relative anyway – but a friend of Betty's mother. The pair of them had worked together with many years as nurses in the local mental hospital. Auntie invited Betty and me to stay with her and her husband in their little flat at Hove. We had a lovely week there and were thoroughly spoilt. Auntie had been saving her butter ration – she did not like it herself – so we had lashings of butter on our bread. I was going to hate going home to bread and scrape! Auntie had been a single lady until she was 60. She had met Uncle at a local old people's club. He was a quiet man who suffered bad health. He had been badly gassed in the First

World War and his breathing was very laboured, his movements slow and difficult. You could see that he was a good companion for Auntie, who made up for his quietness as she was an 'Elsie or Doris Waters' type of person. Although Betty and I were able to do as we wished, we had to be in by early evening. As we were only 15, we did not abuse our new-found freedom. Our social lives were opening up now and this week was just the start.

One afternoon we attended a tea dance in Brighton, the nearest big town to Hove. As we had had some dance lessons in Caterham, we felt confident in going along. There was a live band, but not many people. I sat fascinated watching a Chinese girl in a slinky mandarin-collared dress gliding across the floor. Her partner was immaculately dressed in a dark suit. They danced every dance, including the rumba and tango, dances I found difficult to do. Betty and I had to dance together. There seemed to be a shortage of young men in the afternoon. After we left the dance we walked up the main street in Brighton, window shopping. Suddenly we were aware of being followed. Every time we stopped to look in a shop window, a young man, about 20 paces away also stopped. We tested him out. Yes, he was following us, but why? On arriving at the bus stop to return to Hove, he also joined the queue. When we climbed on the bus, he spoke for the first time. Could he pay our fares? After refusing, we sat in silence until we reached our stop. We quickly jumped off the bus, but he followed too. Betty and I discussed what we should do. Shall we make a dash for it and see what happened? We ran full pelt along two roads and to our relief, realised that we had shaken him off. On another occasion in Brighton, a car drew up beside us and three young men tried to persuade us to climb in. One kept calling me Alice, due I suppose, to my straight hair which would not stay curly in the seaside air. We just kept walking along with our noses in the air, and eventually they gave up and drove away.

There was always plenty going on in Brighton and one day we heard that a naval destroyer was anchored off shore and were allowing free daily visits to the public. Betty and I thought that sounded great. We were, of course, more interested in meeting the sailors than visiting the ship. Small pleasure boats were taking parties of people backwards and forwards, and so one day we put on our best dresses, went down to the beach and paid our fare on the first boat going out. On reaching the destroyer, some of our boat passengers suddenly realised they were not going to be able to climb the rope ladder which hung down the side of the ship. They decided to return to shore, but Betty and I and other younger passengers made it, although we had unsuitable footwear – sandals in fact. Once on board we were given a tour of the upper and lower decks including the engine room. Smiles and cheeky remarks came our way, and by lunchtime a small group of sailors surrounded Betty and me on the upper deck, offering us tea, coffee and bites to eat. We laughed and chatted, exchanging stories and addresses.

Betty and I decided that we would take the last boat back, at 5 p.m. We were having too good a time to leave yet. Up until mid-afternoon the sun had been shining and the sea was calm, but it was clouding over and we noticed that the destroyer was rolling. By late afternoon the weather had deteriorated so much that we began to feel concerned. There were only about ten passengers left on the destroyer, but we received a message that the boat was not coming back for us as the sea was getting too rough. One of our new sailor friends thought we would have to stay on board for the night and Betty and I were all for that. Unfortunately one of the passengers said it was imperative that he went home and so an SOS was sent out for the lifeboat. By the time it reached us, enormous waves were pounding on the side of the ship. One minute the lifeboat was halfway up the side of the ship, the next minute it had plunged 20 feet down. I was scared when it was my turn to climb down the rope ladder. Facing backwards was even worse coming down. So that we had our hands free, Betty and I had to stuff our purses and sandals into our jacket pockets and climb down the ladder barefoot. The coxswain shouted out to me 'When I shout jump, you *must* jump'. The lifeboat disappeared into the crest of a wave and as I could see it rise, I knew the call would be soon. When I heard 'jump' I let go and landed like a sack of coal into the arms of one of the crew. Betty followed on the next wave. When all passengers were accounted for, we were wrapped in oilskins and set off in mountainous seas, our destination being the pier. Several passengers were feeling seasick, but Betty and I managed to keep things down. It seemed a long time to reach that pier and then we had an iron ladder to climb. A small group of sightseers greeted us at the top. What a pathetic lot we looked. Auntie could hardly believe her eyes when two very bedraggled girls came home. Our clothes were soaking and our hair hung down in wet and unsightly strands. After changing into some dry things and having something to eat and drink, we were able to tell Auntie and Uncle about our exciting day out. At the end of the week, there was a report in the local newspaper of the event, which I cut out and took home for my parents to read.

Working at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital

The summer wore on and my shorthand and typing were improving. I had by now passed several examinations and soon I would be looking for my first job. At the end of term several interviews were offered to me by the college head, Miss Attwood. One was at the Imperial Bank of India, but I turned it down as I knew it would involve figure work, which I hated. Another position was for a secretary to an almoner at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital. I thought that sounded promising. If I was appointed to the job, I would bide my time and transfer to nursing (something I had always wanted to do) when I reached the required age of 17. An interview was arranged, and as I was still only 15 and very nervous and

unsure of going up to London on my own Mum agreed to accompany me. We arrived early on the required date, so we sat in Queen's Square nearby, close to Edith Cavell's statue. I had butterflies in my stomach when we were eventually ushered into the head almoner's office for my interview. An austere grey-haired lady in a white cotton overall sat on the other side of the desk. Throughout the interview she addressed herself to my mother and told her what was expected of me. There was the filing to do, letters to be taken down in shorthand and typed, and I would have to take turns with other staff doing up the department's mail at the end of the day. There was also a rota for making drinking chocolate in the mornings and tea in the afternoons. Officially the hours were 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. but if you were on postal duties it was more likely to be 6 p.m. Also I would have to work every other Saturday morning from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. The pay was 35s.0d. per week, with an assurance that this sum would rise to 2 guineas a week after Christmas. Meals would be taken in the nurses' canteen. After perusing my RSA certificates in shorthand and typing the job was offered to me. Mum said she would consult my father and then we would let the almoner know.

There were plenty of jobs about, especially office jobs. People had not yet come back from the war to take up their positions. After my interview, Mum and I decided to have a sandwich in Oxford Street and visit some shops, just to look around. I cannot remember the name of the store, but it had a large roof garden and we had a bite to eat up there. We arrived home early evening tired, but excited by our day out. Dad thought the terms and conditions for the job at Great Ormond Street were good, so I was advised to accept it.

I was extremely nervous on my first day at work in August 1945. The journey itself was harrowing. I left home at 7 a.m. and walked the 1½ miles to the station. The train journey to London Bridge took 40 minutes and then I had to catch a bus to Holborn. It was another half hour's journey, passing on the way St. Paul's and Barts Hospital. Every now and then gaps appeared between the tall buildings. Obviously bombs had fallen there. My stop was the Holborn Empire. This theatre had a direct hit during the war and it was now just a pathetic shell. I walked up Southampton Row towards Queen's Square and Great Ormond Street. There was an area of bomb-damaged buildings on each side of the road. I arrived at the hospital shortly before 9 a.m. Altogether from door-to-door, it was a two-hour journey. All this was before you started work

I was to work in an office with another girl who had been there for some time. My duties would be to the almoner who was in charge of the After Care Trust (ACT) as it was called. My very first job was filing patients' folders, which took me until 4 p.m. and then I had to take dictation and type three or four letters. The department had five almoners, all with their own typists. We either went to first or second lunch according to the rota and we typists took turns to make hot chocolate in the mornings. The chocolate powder, in huge tins, came from America or

Canada. Unfortunately it had bugs in it and you had to scoop them out before taking it round for everyone to drink. Everyone knew – but no one seemed to mind – about the bugs. Lunch was taken in the nurses' home, and was monotonous. Three days of the week it was rissoles served with mash and peas or cabbage, one day it was liver, and one day fish. One day one of the girls was horrified to find that she had five caterpillars in her dollop of cabbage. Puddings were usually semolina with a spoonful of jam, but occasionally we had steamed pudding with lumpy custard. One week we were treated to steamed chocolate pudding with chocolate sauce. The girl sitting next to me thought it was marvellous and she said she was going to ask for more. We stared at her in amazement. Would she dare? She did, and she got it. I would have loved some more, but the more I thought about it, the more I could not do it. I kept thinking of Oliver Twist!

After a few weeks I settled down to the job and I really quite enjoyed it, tiring though it was. When it was my week to do the post, I very rarely arrived home in the evening before 7.30 p.m.

Parts of the hospital were quite old and antiquated and I nearly lost my fingers when a sash cord broke one day and the office window came crashing down. The newer buildings were seven storeys high, the private wing being on the top floor. I had never seen such a high building before. Its back and two sides created an echo, and if you were standing outside on the ground, the voices of children laughing and crying seemed to reverberate all round. One day I heard a loud piercing scream. I learned later that it was the grief of a mother whose child had just died.

Sometimes I had to go down to the basement of the hospital, to the laundry. The typists all wore green drill overalls with removable buttons. Every week we had a change of overalls, one of us having to take the dirty washing down to the laundry. There were long corridors in the basement with hot pipes running along the top of the walls. One day I heard a scuffle and a large fat rat was sitting there looking at me. Office rules stated that you were not allowed to wear nail varnish and only the minimum of lipstick. One girl was hauled up before the Head Almoner for daring to tie her hair back in a pony tail with a chiffon scarf. It was considered too frivolous for office wear, she was told.

I enjoyed earning money, though I had little left at the end of the week. From my wage of 35s.0d. I gave Mum £1 a week for my keep, spent 7s.6d. on fares and the few shillings left were mine. I spent it mostly on knitting wool. My friend Jean and her sister had also found jobs as typists in London, so we travelled up together and we three knitted throughout the journey. The clinking of needles must have got on the nerves of other passengers, especially as Jean had the extra distraction of a bracelet with jangling bells on it. One of the garments I made was a dark brown jumper with a white yoke, incorporating two stags. I was really pleased with the

result, but the first time Mum washed it for me the dye ran from the brown into the white, which ruined the jumper.

If you needed a new blouse, skirt, dress or shoes, you had to save up your clothing coupons, which were issued during the war and were still being used in 1945. Rationing of certain foods was still in force too. Christmas of 1945 brought everyone's fairy lights out. No more blackouts. Real Christmas trees were readily available and ours came from the estate where Granddad Hunt worked. We also had a large chicken which Dad himself plucked. The tins of fruit stored in the emergency rations box came out of the cupboard. We had plum pudding and mince pies, home-made of course. So, with our grandparents, we had our first free and easy Christmas for a long time. New Year saw all the revellers in Trafalgar Square. Some friends wanted me to join them there, but I hated crowds and being jostled about, so declined.

Leisure in 1946

In the months of 1946 I began to gain confidence in myself. I accepted more responsibility at work. My social life widened. One of my workmates, Doris, suggested we go to see *Oklahoma*, which had just opened at Drury Lane. I loved it. That was my first theatre show and I was hooked. After the show we went to Doris's home, where I was to spend the night. She lived in the East End of London. I did not know what an awful place it was until I woke in the morning. All around were industrial chimneys, their smoke billowing out black fumes, and next to them was an enormous gas holder. Doris's family lived in a terraced house sitting in amongst this lot. All the windows were grimy and the house bricks were black. What an unhealthy place to live! I was glad I lived in Surrey. Doris's Mum was a sweet lady and nothing was too much trouble. For breakfast she gave us great big fat sausages and tomatoes. I never saw Doris's Dad. He had gone to bed before we arrived the night before, and had gone to work in one of those awful factories before we were up. Doris had a younger sister and brother, who were chubby and clean. How her Mum managed to keep them clean in that environment, I shall never know.

Back in Caterham, Betty and I joined ballroom dancing classes run by a Mrs. Furnival. She charged 1s.6d for a ½ hour lesson or, if you could afford it, 3s 0d an hour. Her lessons were given in a room over a shop in the High Street. There was not a stick of furniture in the room, apart from the wind-up gramophone. She only took six pupils at any one time as otherwise we would trip over each other in the rather small room. As it was, the floor sloped and the floorboards were very uneven. We were all girls in our class, which made it doubly difficult. Not only did we learn the ladies' steps, we needed to learn the men's as well, otherwise we could not dance with each other. We learned the waltz first, accompanied by the

music of Victor Sylvester. Next came the quickstep and fox-trot, followed by the more difficult rumba and tango. We picked it up quite easily, and in a few months were quite proficient. Mrs. Furnival, a tall thin middle aged lady with a loud voice, was a good teacher. She knew a lot of intricate steps. Perhaps she herself had been a professional.

Now that we had some dancing skills, either Betty and I or Jean, her sister Edna and I took ourselves off to the best dances. We tried those at St. Lawrence's Mental Hospital and also at the Guard's Depôt. Both venues were in the same road and were only ten minutes walk from home. Each had their merits. St. Lawrence's was more refined with their polished dance floor, and you could sit at individual tables covered with small cloths. The resident band was small but good. There were still some Canadian soldiers living in Caterham, so some of them used to come to the dances. Once they had been repatriated, it seemed that only the hospital staff were interested, and they did not seem my type. It was strange that any of the local lads hardly ever came. Perhaps they thought there was too much competition. My problem was always what to wear. I loved clothes, but as yet could not afford many. Mum knitted me a lovely pink jumper, embroidered with sprigs of flowers, which I wore quite often. I would alternate this with something else, either a blouse and skirt or a dress. I would not dream of wearing the same thing two weeks running. A pair of summer sandals completed the outfit.

One of my old school friends had her handbag stolen at one of the hospital dances. It was the usual practice to leave your coats in one of the nurses' rest-rooms with any other belongings such as a change of footwear. She left her handbag under her coat, but when it was time to go home, discovered that it had been taken, and it was never found. It taught me a lesson; thereafter I took just enough money to pay for my ticket, a drink and a raffle ticket.

Dances at the Guards' Depot were an altogether different kettle of fish. Only girls were invited. Each regiment took it in turn to run the dances and there was no shortage of men partners. There were about 10 soldiers to each girl. We had some great times there, that is if you did not mind being trodden on by army boots! The dance-floor suffered, and you had a job to lift your feet on the unpolished surface, although chalk was thrown on it – which was supposed to make your feet slide more easily. The band was made up of Guardsmen, and there were usually 12 to 16 on the stage. The hall was the army gymnasium, and part of it was partitioned off for serving drinks to all except the officers, who had theirs on the balcony at the end of the gym. You could only go strictly by invitation and Jean's sister, Edna, managed to get us there on several occasions. She was the pretty one and drew a lot of attention from all ranks. I found it very difficult to understand the accent of the northerners, and the Scots were even worse. One Saturday night I met a nice soldier who came from the north. He kept asking me to dance, ignoring Edna and Jean, which I thought was strange as they were more attractive than I. It turned out

that I was the spitting image of his girlfriend in the north! He was not interested in any of us really. Another time Jean and I met a couple of mates who were sergeants and after dancing with them all evening they asked us to go out with them on the next day, which was Sunday. We agreed to meet them at the Barracks gates. Dad said to me 'I bet they don't turn up', and he was right. Jean and I waited for more than an hour and then gave up. Through Edna, we were invited to a Sergeants' Mess ball and we wondered if we would see our errant suitors. They were there, and Jean and I decided to confront them and give them a piece of our minds. They were ignoring us, proving that they were guilty of letting us down. Their excuse was that they unexpectedly had to go on duty. We did not believe them and decided in the end that they were not worth troubling about.

At this time I wanted to give up my piano lessons. I simply did not want to do them any more. As far as I could see they were a waste of time. I was never going to be much of a pianist. I left it to Mum to tell Mrs. Robinson that I was leaving. She in turn told Mum I was stopping lessons because I had been entered into a piano competition that I did not want to participate in. That was totally untrue.

Mum, as always, tried to encourage me to join other things. Knowing that I was a quiet, withdrawn and shy girl, I suppose she thought it was the best way to bring me out of myself. She had heard that the local Co-op was forming a youth club over its shop in the High Street. I agreed to go if I could persuade Jean to come with me. We duly turned up on the first night, not quite knowing what to expect. We climbed the stairs to find a roomful of boys and girls, some of whom were old school friends. After we were all seated, a very small middle-aged man informed us that he was the district youth leader and introduced us to his assistant, a young woman in her twenties, whose name was May. He followed with a talk on how the Club would be run and what we would be doing. In the summer we would go for walks, cycling and trips to the coast. Winter activities would include lectures, games and social evenings. He went on to tell us about the Co-operative Society and what its aims were for the youth of today. It was up to us to set a good example and be guided by the Co-op. Jean and I thought this all rather serious, and although we tried to show an interest our eyes were roaming about to see what boys we fancied. The Club was going to meet twice a week, each time for a two hour session. Jean and I decided to give it a go.

A Devon Holiday

As the spring of 1946 wore on, Dad decided that we should all have a good holiday. Owing to the war we had not been away for six years. An acquaintance had given Dad an address of a farm in South Devon, owned by a newly-wed young couple. It was arranged for all five of us to spend two weeks there in August. We all looked forward to it. As I was now a working girl, I was expected

to pay something towards this holiday. Jennifer was also working now, as an apprentice hairdresser, so she would also have to contribute. We started saving straight away. Instead of buying new clothes, I would save by trying to make some new dresses for myself. Cotton material was a reasonable price. I bought some in Petticoat Lane Sunday morning market. Jean and I took advantage of our season tickets and went up to London several times a year to Petticoat Lane. The market opened at about 8 a.m. and went on until 1 or 2 p.m. At different times we bought shoes, sandals, materials and jewellery.

My first attempt at dressmaking was disastrous. For one thing I cut out two right sleeves. It was a good job they were short sleeves. Fortunately I had enough material over to cut out a left sleeve. I had difficulty in understanding the pattern instructions and in the end called on a cousin to help me make this dress. Mum had a vague idea about dressmaking, but it was Granny Snook who was the expert. I would have to take some lessons from her.

As our holiday drew closer, Dad began to study maps for the best route to take. It was a long way to Devon and we would be rather cramped in our little Morris Minor. Dad said we would all have to get up at 5 a.m. and leave home at 6 in order to arrive there by tea time. Came the big day and two rather battered suitcases were strapped in the boot and off we went. The night before Mum had made loads of sandwiches and flasks of tea in case there were no roadside cafés to stop at. In any case it would save us money.

By mid-afternoon, our uneventful journey was for me turning into one of boredom. The narrow Devon lanes with their steep banks spoil any possible views of the countryside. We passed numerous cross-roads, but signposts were few and far between. They had all been taken down during the war so as to confuse the enemy. We had no idea where we were, but a kindly farmworker put us on the right track, or so we thought. Castle Farm was the place we were looking for, but apparently there were three in the area and each one was down a rough track. We would have to try them all. Luckily the first we tried was the right one, and as it was now late afternoon we fell out of the car with great relief. We were greeted at the door by a very tall big-built man, probably in his early thirties and with a broad Devon accent. He introduced his slightly younger wife, who was a neat little person in her cotton dress and overall. She had short curly bobbed hair, a style that I thought was rather old-fashioned. She wore no make-up at all. After ushering us upstairs to show us our respective bedrooms, we were brought back down again to the parlour for tea, sandwiches and cakes. Next to the parlour was a sitting room which we were told we could make use of. Although Mr. & Mrs. Wakeham had been married for only a few months, there was ample comfortable but old furniture everywhere. The bookcase in the sitting room was packed with books. Perhaps it was an inherited farmhouse. We were all too tired to explore further and all of us retired early.

Life on a working farm is so different from suburbia. I was not sure what to make of it all. From day one, noises woke me very early in the morning. It started with cocks crowing, and the clanking of metal against metal – milking pails, I suspected. Every day we had fresh eggs for breakfast, served in all sorts of ways. We made it known that we would like to help on the farm in any way, so on some days we were given small churns filled with tea, sandwiches and cakes to take into the fields.

Mr. Wakeham was basically a cereal grower and our stay coincided with harvest time. On our first sunny day a large field was due to be cut. At lunchtime we sat in the corner of the field with other farmhands, all eating, drinking and chatting away. Half the field had been cut in the morning. The middle section was left until the locals turned up with their guns and dogs. I did not know until then that cereal fields were cut from the outside working inwards. When about 20 or 30 yards were left in the middle, a line of gunmen and dogs took up their positions, ready for when the rabbits came scurrying out. Suddenly when there was about ten yards square left, all hell broke loose, as everything furry came dashing out in panic. Most of the rabbits were outrun by the little Jack Russell-type dogs and the others were shot by the farmers. Smaller furry creatures darted everywhere, but nobody bothered about them. Everyone was pleased with the results. Rabbit pie for dinner tomorrow!

For the next couple of days we were asked if we could help with the stooking. Mum, Jen and I agreed. Dad and Chris did something else. Stooking is grouping sheaves of grain against each other in cones in order for them to dry. Anyone who thought it was easy, like me, had another think coming. If you did not get the sheaves balanced correctly, they would all fall flat on the field. We had a few laughs to start with, but became increasingly fed up when we got hot and bothered. Bits floating in the air got up our noses and made us sneeze, and the sharp ends of the grain stalks dug into our fingers and feet. We were bare-legged and wearing sandals – not the ideal footwear for such a job. We had scratches on our legs and drops of blood on exposed bits of our feet. The stubble in the field was treacherous to walk on. At the end of the day, we decided not to volunteer our services to do another field.

Twice during our two week stay in Devon it poured with rain all day. What do you do on a wet day in the country? On one occasion Dad took us to the pictures in nearby Kingsbridge. The film was *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. What a melancholy film! It was all about an immigrant family in America and the hardships they endured. We emerged from the cinema feeling glum, and as it was still raining none of us felt very cheerful. On another very wet day we sat in Mrs. Wakeham's sitting room. We scoured the bookshelves for something interesting to read. Dad was quite happy with a magazine, but I found nothing to interest me. I was thoroughly fed up and could not wait for mealtime to relieve the boredom.

I must say Mrs. Wakeham gave us some very good meals. Teatime was especially nice. There was always plenty of home-made cakes and scones, accompanied by home-made jam and double Devon cream. Cream from Devon was totally different from any other that I had ever tasted, and I liked it very much.

At the front of the farm the door to the parlour opened straight out into the porch, and if it was left ajar an assortment of animals made their way in, usually a chicken or a cat, but one morning it was a small duck. Apparently it had lost its mother and a farmhand was rearing it. It followed him everywhere. As it happened, he was just outside the door and the duck waddled off when he called to it.

One of our day trips was to Salcombe, Hope Cove and Brixham. We like the places, but the visitors in them were what Dad called 'toffs', and at Hope Cove they looked us up and down with disdain and we got the impression they considered the Cove to be their own private beach. I much admired some glass paperweights I saw in a little shop there. On enquiring the cost of them I was told that they were too expensive for the likes of me. Maybe that was right, but I felt like slamming the door when I left. One thing I saw when we were in Kingsbridge was a pair of green square-toed shoes. They were very fashionable and I made up my mind that I was going to have them if I had enough money at the end of the holiday and if they were still there when we visited the town again.

At the end of our holiday in Devon there was sadness and gladness. Unfortunately the young farmhand reversed his tractor over his beloved duck. I have never seen a young man so upset. It was more than a pet to him. He was its 'mother'. I bought my pair of green shoes, although they cost me £3 – a week's wages. I was glad to be going home. Although I liked the countryside, I felt that suburbia was more for me. There was a lot more going on.

A friend of Mum's had a daughter who was selling her ice skates and as they were my size, I decided that I would like to buy them. Our local ice rink was three miles away, in Purley. You could hire the necessary skates there, but I thought it would be nicer to have my own. It was bit nerve-racking, that first step onto ice. Having had no lessons, I clung to the side rail and sort of walked round the rink. Other friends whizzed past me, skating to the music of a Harry James record. Through the next few months I visited the ice rink once a week and although I managed to skate round the whole rink without holding on, I could never manage to work up any speed. A couple of friends held each of my hands and pulled me round quite fast, but I was afraid of falling over. Having a weak ankle did not help, and I hated falling on my bottom on the hard ice. No, ice skating was not for me, so I resold the boots to another friend.

Table tennis seemed more in my line. I loved the game and played twice a week at the Co-op Youth Club. Sometimes we played doubles or played in tournaments with other youth clubs in the area. I nearly always managed to get into the finals. In the mixed doubles my partner was invariably Don Turner. I liked him a lot. He was good-looking, but shy. One day he asked me if I had seen the film showing at the local cinema. When I answered no, I prayed that he was going to ask me to go out with him, but he didn't. Several times I was willing him to ask me out, but he never did.

After the Youth Club shut at 10 p.m. we all hopped over the road to a little café. I am sure the friendly gent who ran it, kept it open especially for us. We all crammed in, some of us having to stand. We spent our coppers on a cup of coffee and a cake, and listened to music. Closing time was 10.30 p.m. but we were never rushed.

Our club leader was a lovely person. She and her boyfriend often took us for rambles and outings, giving up their own free time to accompany us. We had outings to the coast, usually Brighton or Eastbourne, sometimes sharing a coach with other clubs. A cycle trip to Knowle in Kent was organised one Sunday. We met outside the Co-op Hall and set off together. I just could not keep up with the others. Try as I might, I was the one struggling at the back of the group. We had gone about three miles when exhaustion overtook me, and I turned back on my own. Feeling worn out, I returned at my own pace. No more trips like this for me. I would rather just amble about with Jean, or even on my own.

As winter approached more indoor events took place – small dances, quizzes and talks. We had a Christmas party and dance. The boys in the club put up the decorations and the girls made and brought the cakes. A good time was had by all.

Towards the end of the year a new girl arrived in the office. Her name was Ann Hargreaves, and she lived in Golders Green. We got on very well together and started visiting each other's homes. During her first weekend at my home, Dad took us down to see Granddad at Godstone and the four of us walked round the estate where he worked. We started at the kitchen garden, which was Granddad's department, after which we walked along the perennial borders. The sun was shining and bees and butterflies were everywhere. We were careful not to walk in front of the house so as not to offend the owners. We were always welcome to walk round the grounds, but we did not want to walk across their windows. We made our way down to the two lakes. The first one had a rickety wooden bridge across it. Nearby stood a cork oak tree, which always fascinated me. Pieces of cork hung from the trunk like loose bark. The second lake was much larger and full of fish. Beyond it was the cricket field and pavilion. Round the other side of

the big house fields stretched into the distance. Our walk ended at the stables, cow sheds and pig styes. Ann thought all this was wonderful. She appreciated the countryside, having spent most of her life in town.

The first time I stay at Ann's home was in the month of December. On the Saturday we were going to the Great Ormond Street Christmas dance. As I had no partner, Ann suggested that she ask her boyfriend's brother to take me. She assured me that he was look-looking and good-mannered, so I agreed. We all met up at the dance, which was being held in the hospital dining room. A large band was playing on the makeshift stage, and the guest singer was Vera Lynn. When she arrived, Ann and I could not stop talking about her dress. It was a $\frac{3}{4}$ -length dress in a very pretty pink. There were lots of layers in the skirt and unfortunately the bottom edges were fraying. Threads hung down higgledy piggledy all the way round. Nobody would normally have noticed, but they were picked out by the stage footlights. It was a good job that the lady herself was unaware of it. In any case I felt sorry because it was still difficult to buy new outfits with the limited number of clothing coupons still issued.

John, my partner, was so quiet. I am not sure if he was shy, or he did not like me. I kept trying to talk to him, but to no avail. He was an excellent dancer. Perhaps he had to concentrate too hard, and was not able to converse at the same time. Anyway, the other two had plenty to say and so I listened to them. Ann looked really attractive in her pale green nylon dress. She was a pretty girl, and her short curly hair set off the dangly earrings that matched her dress. I was wearing a long black skirt with a light blue short-sleeved satin blouse. After the dance, we took the Tube part way and then a taxi to Golders Green, Ann's home. After we got out together, the boys continued on to their own home. Ann's family owned a shop that sold all manner of leather goods. They lived in accommodation at the rear and above the shop. The furniture was big and lumbering, and the chairs had leather seats. I was to sleep in the sitting room on two armchairs pushed together. It was pretty disastrous as the chairs kept moving apart, and I was also freezing cold. I tried putting my coat on top of the blanket, but I only dozed fitfully and was glad when it was time to get up. Ann's Mum was a nice cuddly older woman and was quite upset to hear of my rough night. She was determined to give me a hot water bottle the next night. Ann had two older brothers, one married and one still at home. He was a charmer and paid me a lot of compliments, but I was not sure how to accept them. I was given a tour of the shop, which sold suitcases, bags and belts, etc. Everything was genuine leather, and the smell was quite overpowering. The shop was on a main road, so I could see why Ann liked to come down to the country.

Still working at the Hospital –1947

By the spring of 1947, I was quite happy and settled in my job at Great Ormond Street. I had recently been transferred to the almoner in surgical out-patients, and we got on very well. She was very friendly, and we often discussed our private lives. Conditions in the hospital were improving. Better meals were being served, and working hours were cut to 40 a week, although it was impossible to keep to them, especially if it was your week for doing the mail.

The girls in the secretarial department came from all walks of life, ranging from an Admiral's daughter to a gas-fitter's daughter. Some moved on after six months or so. There were plenty of jobs to be had in London. One of the girls, Iris, was one of identical triplets. She loved playing cards and taught us the game of Canasta, which some of us played in the lunch break. Whilst playing, we discussed our heroes of the day, which were usually actors such as Dirk Bogarde and Stewart Grainger. Actresses we admired were Pat Roc, Phyllis Calvert and Margaret Lockwood. The latter was playing *Peter Pan* one year, and came to Great Ormond Street to visit the Peter Pan Ward, so named as the rights from the John Barrie book go to this ward. Miss Lockwood was a charming lady and shook hands with everyone.

All around Great Ormond Street there were bomb sites. On arriving or leaving the office, I walked past streets of rubble. Some of it looked very strange. There was maybe an occasional wall standing on its own, with a couple of doorways one above the other. Pieces of wallpaper fluttered in the wind. Sometimes a fireplace hung precariously, looking as if it was ready to drop on anyone who came too near. I wondered about the people who had lived there. Had they survived? It was surprising how nature had taken over so quickly. Rosebay willowherb was growing everywhere, its feathery seeds drifting in the sunshine. Pigeons fluttered in and out of inaccessible places. Surely it would take years to clear all this and rebuild, but no doubt it would be done.

One day, a couple of months before my seventeenth birthday, Jean and I were cycling to the Co-op Club. On arriving, we noticed a couple of local lads leaning from the upstairs windows, the hall being above the Co-op shop. One of them remarked 'Here comes my new girlfriend'. The other boy said 'Which one?' The first boy answered 'The one riding at the back'. As this was me, I was rather dumbfounded. I had never spoken to this boy before, although I had known him since he was a small child. He was slightly younger than I, though he appeared very mature for his age. As I climbed the stairs to the hall, I could feel myself getting very annoyed at the audacity of this boy. What made him think that I would even give him a second glance? Yes, he was good-looking – and he knew it – but he was also cocky and I was wary as he approached me. I felt myself backing away, but he was persistent and kept chatting me up. His friend showed

surprise that Bob preferred me to my better-looking friend, Jean. I was not used to all this attention and my natural reserve made me want to leave and go home as soon as possible, which I did. For the next three days I was not sure whether I was even going back to the club. I was half scared and half interested in being pursued. Why was he so interested in me? Anyway, I decided to brave another visit to the Club. Bob was waiting on the doorstep. He was charming and polite. He escorted me up the stairs and arranged for us to play a game of table tennis. Unfortunately, sitting in the corner of the room was Bob's ex-girlfriend looking suitably miserable. She obviously blamed me for his change of affections, and although we were old school friends she never spoke to me again.

Like me, Bob was Caterham born and bred. He was an only child of strict older parents. Although he was the only one, he had lots of other relations on his father's side living in the area. They were all jolly and friendly. Our romance progressed through the summer. We took short bike rides in the local countryside. I was not able to go long distances, as I quickly became exhausted. I was not like the sporty type with tons of energy. I preferred walking, which we did quite a lot. We visited each other's homes during the week, and tea on Sundays alternated between our two homes. I think my family had mixed feelings about Bob. I know Dad thought he was 'far too big for his boots'. I know he was cocksure, but I was more attracted to that type of person. I am not sure what his parents thought of me.

Bob's Dad was a round and jolly sort of man who spoke very little. His mother on the other hand was a steely kind of woman with hair to match. Handling her slate-grey hair was like handling wire. The reason I know this is that she asked me to curl it for her one day. She also had a noticeable moustache, which was yellowing owing to her constant chain-smoking.

Bob and I tended to spend more time at his house because there we could be by ourselves. Most evenings his parents went to the local pub, returning at 10.30 p.m. This gave us time to kiss and cuddle on their sofa. Nothing more took place; we were too afraid of the consequences. One evening his parents came home rather early and we had the lights out. His mother was very indignant and said we must not do it again!

Bob's Dad worked in the local mental hospital, and I think his Mum had worked there too in the past. Their little home was much smaller than mine. It was sandwiched between a long line of terraced cottages, built at the turn of the century. The rooms were all very tiny. These houses had no bathrooms, but some people had their spare bedroom converted into one, and this one had. There was virtually no front garden, but a long patch at the back ended at a gate leading to a rough lane.

After leaving college, Bob looked around for a job. He was not sure what he wanted to do. Jobs were plentiful and varied and in the end he settled for an office vacancy in the local coal merchant's. It entailed answering the 'phone, invoicing fuel orders and taking payments from customers, some of whom could only afford to pay in instalments. He was able to cycle to work, which took about 10 minutes, so there were no fares to be paid. Just as well, because the pay was not very good.

We continued going to the Co-op Youth Club and everyone started thinking of us as a pair. We went for walks and outings and social evenings with the Club. We decided not to see each other every day, so that we could do our own thing. I wanted to practise dress-making, so Mum gave me her 1930s red satin evening dress to cut up. I decided to make an evening top for myself out of it. The dress itself was beautifully styled. It had a V-neck, a nipped-in waist and the skirt flared out to the ankles. The bottom edge was finished with a pleated frill. The sleeves were cape-shaped and they were also finished with a frill. It was truly a Ginger Rogers type of dress. As that style was now out of fashion, I cut the skirt off at hip length, removed the frill from the bottom and reattached it to the hip-length dress. I was pleased with my efforts and wore it to the next dance. My friends were less than enthusiastic. One said that I looked pregnant in it and another called me a scarlet woman! Bob refused to comment. I never wore it again, and although it had not been fashionable, I could have kicked myself for ruining a perfectly good dress.

My next effort met with more success. I started from scratch that time. I bought some blue and white gingham material and a proper pattern. With the help of Mum, I turned out a wearable garment for the summer. It fitted me well and it also suited me. Gingham can be boring, but the design incorporated bias binding on the sleeve edges, down the front and on the dropped waistline, and the finished effect looked like a suit. I was happy with it.

During the summer, Mum, Jen and I took ourselves off to the fair that was visiting Caterham. Dad used to bring home very nice china and glass ornaments that he won at fairs before the war. Now it was austerity time and there was not a lot to win. There were other types of side shows, including an advertisement outside a tent which said 'Come and visit "Seala", the amazing half fish, half woman'. All three of us were intrigued and curious, so we paid the fee and walked in. Inside we stood behind a roped-off area and then when a suitable number of people had taken their places, a curtained-off area opened, and out walked a young woman of about 18. I noticed from the start, that she looked none too clean. Her long blonde hair was matted and needed a good wash. She wore an odd-looking shin-length red dress, gathered at the waist. The material looked like velvet that had worn thin. Round her shoulders was a small cape edged with a faded braid. With a flourish, she flung off the cape to reveal two flipper-like arms. I stood transfixed. What was going to happen now? The girl shuffled her feet through the straw strewn on

the floor and sat down on a wooden seat. Lying on top of the straw was a sketch pad and several pencils and crayons. She picked a pencil up with her toes and began to draw. I looked not at the drawing, but at her face. It was streaked with dirt. She spoke not a word and continued in silence, concentrating on her drawing. Her feet were decidedly grubby and they looked calloused and hard. She did several drawings, turning the pages of her sketchbook with her toes. After a while she got up, walked towards the curtains and disappeared. We onlookers filed out of the tent. Some tut-tutted but no one spoke. On the way home Mum said 'what a shame' and mumbled something about an accident of birth. All three of us were subdued and I kept thinking about the poor girl. She was surely being exploited, but that was probably the only way she could earn a living. Either way was bad. I doubted if anyone was going to help her. Clearly something needed to be done.

Peacetime Holidays in Hastings

Summer wore on and this year we were all going to Hastings for a holiday. Through business Dad knew someone who had two flats above a shop which was situated on the seafront. Mr. & Mrs. Green lived in one flat themselves; the other was for holidaymakers and Mrs. Green did the catering. The holiday flat was quite small. The main room faced the sea and the two bedrooms looked out onto the backyard. Mum, Jen and I had to share one double bed. Mum and I slept down the bed and Jen faced the other way, through the middle – It was bit cramped but we managed. Dad and Chris shared the other double-bedded room. We were situated over a foreign restaurant and occasionally we were subjected to some peculiar smells.

It was glorious weather that August week and most of the time we just hopped across the road to the beach. Whilst Mum and Dad sat in the sun, Jen, Chris and I took dips in the sea. None of us could swim, but we loved to jump about in the water. Earlier in the year Mum had knitted Jen and I bikini-type swimsuits. What a disaster! As soon as they became waterlogged, they stretched and stretched. We had a job to control the lower half, which fell down as soon as we stood up. The upper portion tied round the neck with two knitted strips, and a further two strips tied round the back. We were forever adjusting these, pulling them tighter and tighter. In the end the whole thing slipped off – very embarrassing! Before we had gone in the sea, Mum had taken our pictures with her old box camera. Just as well. I had the feeling that we would not be wearing these swimsuits too often. Being made of thick wool, they took ages to dry out. As it was such a warm week, we did not move very far, but we did go up the funicular railway and visit the castle ruins on top of the cliff. There was a queue of people waiting to descend the dungeons, including us. With the hot sun beating down on us, I began to feel faint and I had to sit down on a rock. Too much sun made me feel sick and later we

retreated into Hastings caves, where there is an even temperature all the year round.

At the end of the week Jen and I decided to go to a dance being held in a hall on the promenade. We had a lot of fun. A boy asked me to dance and as we twirled around, he moaned about the state of the floor, the refreshments – or lack of them – and the dreadful band. As we danced, one of his friends called out 'Hello sunshine', so I guessed that he must always have had that attitude. He wanted to see me home, but I told him that I had to take my sister home.

Our week's holiday was soon over and so it was back to Caterham again.

Now that Bob and I were both earning, we were able to go out and about more. We seemed to follow a pattern of going to the cinema once a week, attending the Co-op Club twice a week, and usually going to the local dance in the Drill Hall on Saturdays. A local trio provided the music. Stan the pianist was brilliant. He never read music, but could play anything. Most of the people at the dances knew each other, as they were school or club friends. One girl was always surrounded by a group of boys. She was a rebellious type and enjoyed relating her latest exploits to all and sundry. Her mother and stepfather were apparently strict and dances were out of bounds because they finished too late. This did not deter her, however. As soon as she was locked in her bedroom, she would change into something suitable, open the window and slide down the sloping roof, dropping onto a high grassy bank. She went back the same way. It was a big house and she did it with such stealth her parents were unaware of what was going on. I do not know if they ever found her out.

Often, on a Saturday afternoon, Bob and I would take the bus to Croydon. It took about 30 minutes travelling time. Here was a town growing fast. Apart from the big stores, such as Kennards, Grants and Allders, smaller shops were springing up. We did not have much money to spend, but it was nice to window-shop anyway. One day we saw a long line of people reaching down to the doors of Kennards. On further investigation, we discovered it was a queue for nylons! Wonderful! They were so superior to my old lisle stockings. We lined up behind everyone else and hoped that the stock would not run out before it was our turn. Only one pair per customer was allowed, so at least we could go home with two pairs. They were 12s.6d a pair. We could just afford that. My American friend had sent me a pair of US nylons. She sent them in two separate envelopes, which arrived safely. They were beautifully fine and strong and lasted for two years!

Towards the end of the year I began to get pains in my back. In fact the pain centred in the spine between my shoulder blades. At first I tried to ignore it, but the constant ache was getting me down, so I decided to visit my doctor. He

thought my spine should be X-rayed and when I returned for the result, he told me I had a thing called scoliosis. My heart sank to my boots. What was this dreadful disease? He told me not to worry. I had an S-bend in my spine which could be straightened out. He explained to me that the condition is a muscular weakness and can be rectified with manipulation and exercises. Treatment would probably take about six months.

As I worked at Great Ormond Street it was arranged for me to have the treatment there. Twice a week I joined a class of children who laughed at my antics, and I in turn laughed at them. I always thought that I was fairly fit, but swinging by my arms from a wooden bar was extremely difficult. I could hardly hang on at first. The exercises were rigorous, but at the end of six months I was declared fit and well and my spine was straight.

Christmas 1947 came and went. I was happy to have Bob as a partner at the Great Ormond Street Hospital's annual dance. Having been taught by the same teacher we danced very well together. Being an evening dress affair, we enjoyed dressing up. Bob looked good in his tuxedo. Afterwards, I stayed for the night in one of the nurses' rooms and Bob was booked into a little hotel just round the corner.

1948

There were many more items of interest in the shops now that it was 1948, and although some foods like dairy products were still rationed, fruit and sweets were becoming available again. Since the war, the fashion world was coming to life again and I just loved new clothes. Most of my wages went on them. Sometimes I would buy material and make something. My dressmaking skills were improving all the time. A lot of my shopping was done in the lunch-break, in and around Holborn. To go into the West End you needed time, and although we had an occasional Saturday morning off, the shops in London were closed. More often than not I would break my journey in Croydon, where they opened all day on Saturdays, and then return to Caterham in the evening. I always came home with something, be it a dress or a pair of shoes. As spring was just round the corner, pastel shades predominated. There were enough clothes in the shops, although not a large selection, but underwear was not readily available.

Now that the better weather had come, it was time for outdoor activities at the Co-op Club. I was less than enthusiastic. I loved being outdoors, but sports were not my scene. Mostly I went along to watch, but got dragged in sometimes. Bob was a good all-rounder, so I had to support his efforts. Apart from cricket, tennis and clock golf – all played in the local park – rounders attracted the largest number of participants. The activities that I enjoyed most of all were the Sunday rambles. We would take a packed lunch and walk from Caterham to various other villages

such as Godstone, Oxted or Bletchingley. If we walked to Warwick Wold, we would stop at the *Spotted Cow* for a drink. Occasionally we would go further afield on the bus and then walk. The Dorking area being a favourite, we would cut through Friday Street and detour around this small Surrey town.

As summer neared, the subject of our family holidays arose again. Where should we go this year? We all decided that we would like to go back to Hastings again, and so it was duly booked again with Mr. & Mrs. Green for the last week of August. As brother Christopher was only ten, we had to go in the school holidays. It was touch and go whether Jen and I could get the same week off, but we managed it. In my office, those that had worked there the longest had first choice of holiday dates. It was easier for Jennifer, as she was the only hairdresser, apart from her boss. I was hoping that Bob could come with us this time, but there just was not enough room and besides he was looking for another job as the coal office pay was not very good.

One day during May, returning home from work, I was surprised to find Dad in bed. Mum said he had had a nasty turn, whatever that was. I tried to find out from Dad what had happened. He apparently collapsed in a heap on the floor feeling giddy and breathless. The doctor was called by our friend and neighbour, Mrs. Woodhouse. She was the only one who had a telephone in our road. On examination the doctor asked Dad if he suffered from asthma, which he didn't. After going over him with his stethoscope, the doctor proclaimed he could find nothing wrong. After a couple of days rest, Dad was up and about again. He did not look well, and his leg ulcers were playing him up. They really were nasty looking things and needed constant dressing.

Spring turned into summer and my eighteenth birthday came and went. All the family were looking forward to our annual holiday in Hastings again. It turned out to be a mostly wet week. What a shame! We had such lovely memories of the week we had spent there the year before. We mooched around the shops, whilst the sea pounded on the beach. We went to the nearby cinema twice. Once to see *Unconquered* with Gary Cooper and the next time to see *The Tales of Hoffman*, plus a film on cricket, most boring to my mind. Two or three doors away from the flat there was an amusement arcade, which housed pinball and various other machines. We crowded in there with other people trying to escape the driving rain. A juke box kept playing *I'm looking over a four-leafed clover*. You could hear the same tune, over and over again, in the flat at night. I hated it.

On the last morning of our holiday, we walked down the road to Mr. & Mrs. Green's shop, a gents' outfitters. Dad bought a cap and I bought Bob a rather flashy tie. We bade our farewells and walked back to our car, which was parked outside the flat. Our luggage was piled in the boot and we all climbed into the car. Suddenly, Dad grabbed his leg, complaining of cramp. He became dizzy and his

head nodded. Chris became alarmed and started to cry. Dad assured him that he would be all right in a minute, but he gradually lost consciousness. Mum jumped out of the car and rushed down the road to Mr. Green's shop. He, however, had a shop full of customers, and was unable to come. Mum spotted a young policeman, and he came to our assistance and subsequently called an ambulance. We were all in a state of shock. I put my hand on Dad's shoulder, as I instinctively knew that this was the last time I was going to see him alive.

This was going to be the end of a long and happy childhood. Tomorrow I would be a woman.



A Seaside Holiday at Hastings

(left – right)

Muriel, Christopher, Dad and Mum

THE BOURNE SOCIETY

THE Bourne Society was formed in 1956 and takes its name from the underground streams which follow the lines of the A22 and A23 roads, meeting in Purley to flow northward into the River Wandle. The objects of the Society – England's largest local history society – are to extend the knowledge of local history in Caterham, Chaldon, Chelsham, Chipstead, Coulsdon, Farleigh, Godstone, Kenley, Purley, Sanderstead, Whyteleafe, Warlingham and Woldingham, and to ensure the preservation of records and objects of historical interest.

The Society is able to help newcomers to satisfy their curiosity about the area, and to stimulate residents to search out further information. Through its publications, visits, speakers, meetings, placement of plaques, and archaeological work, the Society seeks to place the area in an historical perspective.

The Bourne Society is a registered charity, and as well as general work it has active special-interest groups in archaeology, industrial archaeology, photography, pub history and landscape history. Regular outings, meetings and events are arranged, and a wide range of publications produced, including a quarterly **Bulletin** and an annual *Local History Records*, which are sent free to members. The Society is publishing a series of Village Histories covering its 'member' villages – at end 1998 volumes for Purley, Caterham and Sanderstead are in print, Warlingham is projected for autumn 1999, Coulsdon for 2000. Other volumes are in preparation. Details of publications may be had from the Society's Publications Co-ordinator, Mr John Tyerman, 60 Onslow Gardens, Sanderstead, Croydon CR2 9AT.

Membership of the Bourne Society is open to individuals, families, and organisations. The Society's Membership Secretary, Mrs J Emery, 118 Coulsdon Road, Coulsdon, Surrey, CR5 2LB, will be pleased to provide further details of membership and subscription rates.

MURIEL NEAL (née Hunt) was born in 1930 and her descriptions of her childhood give a vivid account of a time when the pace of life was rather slower than at the end of the 20th century, and at the same time her young teens were strongly influenced by World War II.

Muriel Neal grew up mainly in Caterham, but spent time at South Godstone and Hindhead. Her family lived in Bletchingley for a year during the war.

She describes her family and friends, their neighbours and their surroundings. Her schooldays come alive as do family visits, the excitement of summer seaside holidays, a long stay at Wanstrow in Somerset and her first job at Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Her remarkable memory of the world around her when she was young gives an entertaining insight into childhood with which many of her generation will readily identify.



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