

MEMORIES OF ASHBURY- FROM 1940 TO AROUND 1953

By Patrick Arbuthnot, who lived with his family in an isolated farm cottage called Red Barn that used to stand just North of Hailey Wood, Ashdown



BACKGROUND

The Arbuthnot family came to Ashbury as refugees from the bombing in Kent in 1940.

The family home was in Westerham, very close to the famous Biggin Hill fighter station – and to Winston Churchill's country home Chartwell – making the area a prime target for German attacks.

My father's brother-in-law was in the army stationed at Shrivenham and was living with his family in an Army house in Park Avenue, at that time – and perhaps still – the last row of houses as you leave Shrivenham along the road to Longcot. With our father away in the army (I have his call up telegram dated 3 September 1939) our mother asked if we could come to stay with this family for a time in the summer of 1940 with the hope that the worst of the bombing might end. We duly decamped - mother, older sister Rosemary and older brother Robert – in our tiny Austin Seven and I just remember arriving at Shrivenham after what, in those days, must have been a very arduous journey.

After a few weeks with our cousins my uncle persuaded mother that it was not safe to return to Westerham. As the army would not allow us to stay in Park Avenue for an extended period, mother rented a tiny cottage in Ashbury – the last (Westmost) thatched cottage opposite the Cross Trees, nearest to what was Read's farm. Moving from a modern house in suburban Kent to a cottage with no Mod. Cons – an earth closet in the garden, no running water (there was a stand pipe outside Southwell's Post Office shop opposite the old school) and oil lamps – must have been a major culture shock for mother but she proved to be very adaptable.

I have a few scattered memories of our short stay in this cottage, the most memorable being woken in the middle of a night to see the old Rose and Crown burning down. We stood on the pavement outside Mrs Simpson's little shop and watched men, including, I well remember, George Bailey, risking life and limb in retrieving what furniture they could before the blaze got to it. Then came the shattering news that our house in Westerham had been bombed, an event that changed the course of our family life as we never returned to Westerham.

We moved from the cottage when Bob Spence - who lived at the Manor House and farmed a large acreage comprising the Manor, Berrycroft, and Kingstone farms, and also Maddle near Lambourn – offered us a flat adjoining the Manor. We duly moved in but it turned out to be a short term solution as we were, in fact, only keeping the accommodation warm before the arrival of a groom, Harry Fry, who had been employed to look after the Spence daughters' horses. Mother felt that we had probably been used to avoid the flat being requisitioned to house other refugees. The Spences became good friends and a major influence on my life in later years.



The only accommodation that mother could find available for rent was Red Barn – an isolated farm cottage (photo left) something over a mile south of Ashbury a hundred yards or so north of Hailey Wood. The house had been two cottages which had been leased from the Craven Estate by a Mr Geoffrey Seccombe-Hett whose chief claim to fame was that he represented the UK in the 1936 Olympics Fencing team. He had knocked the two cottages into one and modernised them with the addition of a modern bathroom and flush toilets with septic tank and telephone – but not electricity; we became tenants of the Seccombe-Hett's, who had gone off to Canada as soon as the war started. Water was pumped from a well by a Lister engine of the type that used to power threshing and milking machines in those days (the photo shows

the pumping station in the foreground). Mother became adept at hand starting this heavy engine every few days to top up the tank in the loft but unfortunately the well often ran dry in the Summer and for lengthy periods we had to fill buckets from

the dew pond near the house and, of course, boil it for drinking. This went on until main water was laid to Spence's adjoining farm buildings, probably around 1944, and this was extended to the house. George Bailey, mentioned above, had lived at Red Barn before it was converted and I understand that his son, Eddie (Wobble), whom I believe still lives in one of the Malt Houses, was born there.

Thus began an idyllic childhood in the midst of the Berkshire Downs, surrounded for the next four years by the background to the war which, to a child with no understanding of the horrors behind it, was enormously exciting.

RANDOM MEMORIES



My mother

My mother was in some ways a remarkable woman. To find herself with three small children and an absent husband, in a strange village miles away culturally and economically from the life that she had been used to, must have been a daunting experience. She quickly adapted, however, and soon became accepted in a community which, in those days, had a natural suspicion of strangers.

She was an author of some moderate success, having seven or eight romantic novels published in hardback with titles such as Knight Without Honour, Deep Flows the Stream and Love came Barefoot. She always hoped to emulate Barbara Cartland with whom she had worked on a woman's magazine in London before she was married, but sadly never succeeded.

She kept a diary all her life from the age of 11 and these sit in a box in my garage. These might well be important social documents and probably contain much information of interest to local historians but, sadly, they are so densely written that it is near impossible to identify particular events unless a date is known; they also contain so much of her intimate thinking that I would not want a third party to have access to them.

She used her creative and persuasive skills during the war to organise a series of very successful fundraising concerts in the old Jubilee Hall by the Church, which I will come to later.

In later years, by which time she and my father had moved to Uffington, she served for some time on Berkshire County Council.



Patrick & his mother - 1960

The Ashdown Bombing Range

Our nearest neighbours at Red Barn were the Airmen stationed at the Bombing Range on Tower Hill above Hailey Wood. The range itself was in the valley the other side of Tower Hill, marked on the OS map as Compton Bottom. There was a small cluster of accommodation huts in the centre and some hundred yards to the left and right two towers, called Trig. Points from which the accuracy of the bombing was plotted, the third, middle, Trig Point being in front of the accommodation huts. I spent much time up there - probably against military regulations - often being fed tit bits by the airman (raisins I remember as a particular delicacy) and watching the bombing at close quarters; I remember even sitting in one of the Trig. points and talking to one of the bomber crew over the wireless intercom.

Bombing was continuous day and night from elderly Whitleys in the early years and later from Wellingtons - smoke bombs during the day and flash bombs at night. There was also aerial gunnery practice aimed at a drogue pulled behind another aeroplane.

The only sign of all this now is the concrete foundations of the accommodation huts.

The Airstrip

Sometime probably in 1942 or 1943 an airstrip was built running for a mile or so parallel to the Ridgeway, starting at the Ashbury/Lambourn Road and crossing two or three fields to the west. Looking from the road just beyond Ashbury Folly it is still quite clear where the hedges were removed to make space for the runway.

The soldiers laying the strip were billeted in the Red Barn farm buildings for a couple of weeks or so, and our telephone was requisitioned, with a clerk sitting in our hallway taking messages. The cookhouse was in a barn opposite the house and my brother and I became unofficial breakfast tasters, sampling sausages, bacon and a tea brew which I loved at the time – a sickly sweet concoction of tea, sugar and condensed milk boiled up in a large billy can.

There were two parallel landing strips - one simply rolled earth, the other covered with interlocking metal sheets, presumably for use if the first became mudbound. It was used periodically when squadrons of fighters – I remember Spitfires and Typhoons – would arrive for several days and do continuous circuits and bumps. I have always assumed that this was practice for landing and take off from quickly built landing strips that would be constructed after the invasion of France. I came across an entry in my mother's diary that she had entertained some pilots to tea, which she clearly thought was rather naughty.

Apart from these comings and goings another major event was when we woke up one morning to find a four engined bomber parked on the runway (whether Lancaster, Stirling or Halifax I do not know) with a couple of armed airmen guarding it. It stayed there for several days until a Dakota landed and we watched while the bomber was relieved of everything moveable including guns and bombs before being taken off with only two of the four engines working.

Accidents

I remember four serious accidents around Red Barn during the war years, three military and one civilian.

The first, civilian casualty was when one of Spence's men, surnamed Roberts I seem to remember, was haymaking in a field somewhere up on the downs when the horse pulling the equipment shied, apparently at the noise of a low flying aircraft and he was thrown off and killed. I watched a farm waggon carrying his body back along the Lambourn/Ashbury road.

The second was when two aeroplanes, an Anson and an Oxford I believe, collided in mid air and crashed a field or two to the West of Red Barn. Perhaps rather morbidly we walked over to see the wreckage, by that time guarded by armed airmen – one aircraft almost complete but with the nose smashed in and, close by, the complete tailplane of the second aircraft but no immediate sign of the wreckage of that one. We assumed that no one survived.

The third was on the airstrip. I was at school in Shrivenham at the time along with one or two other Ashbury children. With petrol rationing parents took it in turns to drive us to school and, unless it was my mother's turn, I had to walk back from Ashbury up the hill past the Church and over the Ridgeway. I was told to stop at the runway and ask an airman to see me across. One afternoon I arrived very soon after a plane had skewed off the runway and collided with a lorry and a motor cycle dispatch rider who had been killed. His body was still lying only a few yards from the point where I crossed and it made a deep impression on me, aged about six.

The fourth was a Wellington that crashed over White Horse Hill on 7 July 1943. I have been trying to pinpoint the date of this crash for years until Ray Gigg finally pointed me to a website which gave details which I was then able to confirm by reference to my mother's diary for 1943. It is again a very vivid memory for a seven year old! Memories can be fickle but mine has always been of the plane in a shallow dive making unusual engine noises but with no sign of fire. I rushed in to tell mother and we went to a window at the east end of the house in time to see an enormous explosion immediately behind White Horse Hill. I think in hindsight it was a wrong thing to do but mother bundled Rosemary and myself into the car (I don't know where Robert was) and we drove along the Ridgeway to the point where it crosses White Horse Hill. The smouldering wreckage was alongside a wood and fire engines were already at the scene. Mother had a short conversation with an American soldier who was watching the scene. My mother's diary suggests that six were killed but the website lists eight – four British and four Australian.

Army at Ashdown House

Ashdown House was used by the military throughout the war. A number of Nissan huts were built in the woods to the north of the house and a large water tower erected.

A British unit was stationed there when we first arrived at Red Barn. We had an Officer billeted on us with a batman known as "Digger" for some reason. The unit was posted to Libya and Mother had periodic letters

from Digger from there and we later heard that he had been seriously wounded. He recovered and we continued to receive Christmas cards from him for some years.

Next there came a unit of Paratroopers one summer resting after fighting in North Africa. Some of these worked on the farm at harvest time – a reckless lot fond of potentially very dangerous practical jokes like setting fire to a pile of straw on which one of their number was dozing. They had somehow acquired an old double decker bus to get them to Swindon for entertainment but it seemed less than reliable and I remember the passengers pushing it along on one occasion.

However it was the Americans who, I think stayed longest and certainly made the greatest impression on me.

It's probably not widely known that it was the Americans who built the North entrance to the house; before that there was only the South driveway past the stables.

Mother did a weekly collection for National Savings, mainly around Ashbury and Idstone but also to the Craven Estate game keeper (still employed although there was no game to keep!), a Mr Rivers who lived in a cottage beyond Ashdown House and accessed by the main drive to the House. She was given a pass to get through the camp and I remember feeling somehow quite important when we were stopped each week by the (usually black) sentry and mother showed her pass and we were waved through. The layby where the sentry box stood is still clearly visible to the left of the south entrance to Ashdown House.

At the top of Ashbury Hill, opposite Ashbury folly, there was a Faringdon RDC rubbish tip in an old chalk pit. A convoy from Ashdown came regularly to dump the camp's rubbish there and numbers of locals immediately descended on it to scavenge anything useable. I always recall this when I see films of abject poverty in third world countries showing people scavenging in this way, and I think that in my lifetime we British scavenged off our richer neighbours!

It is a sad fact that the American army was racially segregated at that time to the extent that towns and villages were designated for leisure activities between white and black soldiers. In Ashbury numbers of black soldiers from Ashdown appeared at village fetes and fairs in The Old Rectory Garden and The Jubilee Hall, where they were popular for their apparently free spending. I particularly remember a soldier called Charley who at one event in the hall, carried me around on his shoulders from where I viewed his luck at a game called "Wheel of Fortune" accompanied by him intoning "Round and round she goes and where she stops nobody knows".

At this time we had a young girl from our home town, Westerham, living with us as what would now be called an *au pair*. A striking 16/17 year old blond called Eileen, she was clearly popular with the local menfolk but when the Americans arrived mother felt that she could no longer take responsibility for her moral well being and sent her home.

A less attractive aspect of the Americans' residence was the arrival of the inevitable camp followers – overpainted women who would be found sleeping in barns or anywhere else where they could find shelter and all too often leaving evidence of their night time activities.

The Americans used the golden ball at the top of Ashdown House for target practice and when, after the war, we children used to break into the empty house to generally run riot I remember it being riddled with bullet holes. When I visited the House a few years back on a National Trust tour, it was clear that the ball had only been patched up and the repairs were quite obvious.

Other American Units

American army units were often on exercises around Ashdown, sometimes just for the day, on other occasions camping in Hailey Wood for two or three days at a time.

On one occasion Americans leaving after one of these stays had dug a trench at the edge of the wood and were piling in boxes of "field rations" that they did not need. My brother and I spent some time going back and forth with a wheel barrow salvaging what we could. The boxes were heavily waxed each containing small tins of soup, meat and cheese, sweets, chewing gum and a few cigarettes. None of this would be attractive in this day and age but was a useful supplement in days of meagre rations.

We children made pests of ourselves, begging for chewing gum and anything else that was going. An entry in mother's diary on June 11 1944 reads "Paddy (*as I was called then*) spent the morning and evening with US troops in the wood and collected gum, sweets, three oranges 15s/6d and 60 cigarettes". Quite amazing the unsupervised freedom we were allowed in those days! Given the date one wonders where those soldiers would have been within the next few weeks.

Mrs Partridge, who lived in the end Malthouse nearest Halliday's farmyard used to come to Red Barn to help mother with the cleaning. Her brother was killed in the battle of Alamein and I remember being with mother

when she went to give her condolences. Mrs Partridge's husband Ted was also serving out there; after the war he became the local road maintenance man for Faringdon RDC. On one occasion Mrs Partridge arrived and told me that there were Americans in the yard. I went out and was immediately faced with a group of obviously German soldiers whereupon I fled back to the house, apparently white as a sheet, to tell mother that they were not Americans. They were, of course, Americans acting as the enemy for the day's exercise and I spent a happy afternoon with them in a ditch being fed sweets and chewing gum.

I have often wondered how the army kept children away when there was real fighting going on; I am sure young French boys in Normandy found the Americans equally interesting.

Italian Prisoners

Italian prisoners from a camp at Lambourn came to work on the farm, presumably after Italy had given up in 1943 and become, as the saying went, "co-belligerents". They were lovely men and clearly loved children, teaching me to say "Bon giorno, Comme state?" to which the answer was "Multo bene grazia" (*NB Spelling not guaranteed correct!*). They were fond of telling us "Hitler bad man, Mussolini bad man, Churchill good man". On one occasion two or three of them, sheltering from the rain in a barn, missed the lorry back to the camp and knocked on the door to ask mother for help. I expect she phoned the police but while they waited to be picked up we were given a graphic account of their capture in North Africa, punctuated with imitations of tank, rifle and machine gun noises.

German Prisoners

German prisoners didn't leave their camp to work on the farm until after the end of hostilities. I remember hearing that there were Germans working in the fields and, such was the result of five year's indoctrination that

I approached them very cautiously, half expecting them to have horns and tails. They were there in diminishing numbers for the next three or four years and, as the Lambourn camp ran down, five or six of the last remainders were housed in a farm cottage in Kingstone, on the left as you come away from Kingstone Farm. I well remember Heinz Saberny, Otto Toetl and Bruno Wett. An army lorry delivered their rations each week and, bizarrely they often had more than they could use. We could not have been the only Ashbury family that benefited from the bread, tea and bacon that was surplus to the requirements of our former enemies!

Another German prisoner, Henry Fimmers, had worked for Major Smith at Idstone but joined Spence's later. He married a local girl and I got to know them well – they lived in the cottage on the right on the corner as you come up from Lower Mill. They still live in Purton and we exchange Christmas cards but I haven't seen them for a number of years.

Mother's Concerts

Mother used her creative skills to organise a series of fundraising concerts in the old Jubilee Hall, usually tied to National Savings campaigns such as Wings for Victory and Salute the Soldier weeks. She cajoled and flattered people from all walks of life to take part and found some unlikely talent.

Mrs Simpson (Celia Rose who ran the little shop opposite the Rose and Crown) and Les Coles (who worked at Bunces and was sergeant in the Home Guard) proved to be natural comedians.



Mother (left), with Airey Neave MP and his wife at a fund raiser in Mother's garden – 1970

Mr Cash - a rather grand gentleman with London business interests who lived in The Old Rectory by the Church, was a significant benefactor of the Church and later became Sir William Cash – did a sketch based on A A Milne's "The King's Breakfast". Miss Barlow - a similarly grand lady, who lived in Idstone in a house near Rectory Farm called Trip the Daisy and was the daughter of a Sir Thomas Barlow, Queen Victoria's doctor, sang two or three dire Victorian ballads to polite applause and then brought the house down with a rip roaring version of Widdicombe Fair, starting 'Ron Ayres, Ron Ayres lend me your grey mare, for I want to go to Newbury Fair' and going round the all of Idstone's menfolk to finish with 'Old Uncle Dick Lawrence and all.' Ron Ayres was a self employed Hedger and Ditcher who did ride around on a grey mare and Dick Lawrence farmed at Rectory Farm.

Charlie Bunce (Chuncy) sang old English songs in a good tenor voice with broad Berkshire accent - I well remember his rendering of Buttercup Joe, song that epitomised this fine Ashburian who worked all his life on local farms, as had his father, Jack, before him:

"For I can plow and milk a cow and I can reap and mow. I's as fresh as a daisy that grows in the field, And they calls I 'Buttercup Joe.'"

At another concert a black American from Ashdown, whose name I am sure was Private Jackson, volunteered to do a tap dance act, the *piece de resistance* being picking up a chair in his teeth and doing dance steps and splits with the chair held high! Years later I sat behind the very chair at one of the Thursday film shows in the Jubilee Hall, with the teeth marks clearly visible.

The concerts were accompanied on the piano played by a Mr Clay, who was I think editor of the N. Wilts Herald and lived in a house called Starveall above Bishopstone - even more isolated the Red Barn.

The Home Guard

It is easy to relate the TV Dad's Army to the Ashbury Home Guard that I remember.

Mr Duckham, the Schoolmaster, was Captain, Les Coles the Sergeant and Mr Southwell from the Post Office the local ARP Warden. I remember them exercising near Red Barn and John (Kelly) Bunce (before he joined the real army and went to fight in Normandy) waving a rattle which was meant to represent a machine gun.

A truly Dad's Army incident occurred when the unit was "Stood Down" at the end of the war.

A Mrs Leslie, who lived at Lower Mill, was the wife of a Brigadier who was overseas for most of the war. In 1945 he was back home and was invited to take the salute at the Standing Down March Past.

The saluting base was set up outside the R&C with Brigadier Leslie and Captain Duckham in place.

Unfortunately when the marching company was some 50 yards away a Mrs Beavis (who lived in a large house opposite the Malhouses at the bottom of Ashbury Hill) drove up in her very large car and stopped bang in front of the saluting base.

Les Coles clearly decided that he couldn't salute Mrs Beavis in her car and, spotting my father in his uniform as a lowly wartime Captain standing with mother outside Mrs Simpson's shop, sharply gave "eyes left" instead of "eyes right" and my father took the salute.

Father said that he got his comeuppance later when refreshments were served at the R&C and Brigadier Leslie made a point of coming to speak to him when he had a cup of tea in one hand and a sandwich in the other making the requisite salute somewhat problematic.

Post war

Life changed enormously after the war. For a start I went to boarding school on May 8th 1945, the day the war ended and the difference between the classless freedom that I enjoyed at home with the claustrophobic class ridden restrictions of a boy's boarding prep and, later public school, was difficult to manage.



The last military occupants of Ashdown House were displaced Poles and mother had a job teaching them English - Officers in the morning and Other Ranks in the afternoon.

The highlight of my postwar schooldays was working on Spences farm in the summer holidays from the age of 13 - I really believe the most formative experience of my life. The photo left shows me aged about 16 in front of the Red Barn Cart Shed with a lunch bag over my shoulder. Fellow harvest time workers were David (Tuscy) Barefoot and John (Bunger) Bunce.

Although Spence was the first local farmer to acquire combines (two Canadian Massey Harris No 21s with massive Chrysler V8 petrol engines), in my early years on the farm he was still harvesting some of his crops the old fashioned way. This involved cutting the corn with Reaper and Binder, Shocking Up (known elsewhere as Stooking - stacking the shieves upright in groups of six or seven to dry), "picking up" onto waggons which took them to be built into stacks which were later thatched prior to autumn

threshing – all incredibly labour intensive. I did all these tasks, including “riding the binder” – all day sitting on a hard metal seat over bumpy ground pulled by a tractor, driven by Clarence Stallard, with three handles to adjust the position of the blades, the beater and the string on the shieves. Incidentally, the word “Shock” in place of the more common “stook” was not the only local usage – cattle in fields always drank from Trows (to rhyme with Ploughs) rather than Troughs (to rhyme with coughs).

Later a third combine was acquired and the binder disappeared. The combines were driven by Charley (Chuncy) Bunce, his brother John (Kelly) and Ernie Higgs. Tractors and trailers used to take the corn back to the corn cleaners were driven by the German Henry Fimmers, Bernard Simpson, Clarence Stallard and Tommy (Scint) Chivers.

My last two summers on the farm were spent almost entirely on the corn cleaner and dryer at Manor Farm, where I worked with Ken (Stump) Higgs (whose son was sadly killed in the Falklands) and with Matthew (Sam) Winley; then at the other two cleaners at Maddle and at Limes Farm at Upper Lambourn, working with Bill Satchwith (Billy Satchel). This was tremendously hard work – a twelve hour day, six days a week with a 15 minute break for “lunch” at 9.00am, a half hour break for “dinner” at mid day and a short break for “tea” in late afternoon, often finishing as it was getting dark. On Sundays we usually worked from 9.00am till around 5.00pm. During this time we shifted over 250 2cwt (100kg) sacks off the cleaner, pitched each onto scales to adjust them to the exact weight, then wheeled down to the barn and skilfully tipped them into rows. The most that I earned in a week was £7 and 9shillings which seemed a fortune in 1953.

Years later I met Bill Satchwith driving a tractor through Ashbury. He stopped for a chat during the course of which he said “We made a good team” – something I cherish as a great compliment.

A break from harvesting was when all of Spences cattle had to be brought back to the Manor for an annual Tuberculosis test. This involved a full day driving heifers and steers from as far away as Lambourn. I remember walking back over the downs one fine summer evening near the old bombing range, after delivering the cattle back to Maddle in a group including Charlie Bunce. At two or three points he took a sudden dive into one of the clumps of grass, which were common on the downs before most of them were ploughed up, and each time he came up with a rabbit - a true countryman!