

Memories of Ashbury and Kingston

By Cherille Simpson (now White)

[photographs are at the end]

My earliest memory is of helping to unload the removal lorry when we arrived in Kingston. I think it was in 1942, when I was four. Our grandparents, Florence and Stan – usually known as Sam – Brattle, had brought my brother Brian and I from Portsmouth to escape the war. Our father, Harry Simpson, was in the Royal Navy, although he had been born and had grown up in Kingstone and Ashbury. He had been brought up by his Aunt Rose who had a small shop just opposite the Rose and Crown. Our mother, Florence, was a nurse in Portsmouth, and didn't join us until our Portsmouth house was bombed, a little later.

At first we moved in with Mrs Iles, until a cottage over the road became vacant. Old Nancy Norris lived in one of two thatched cottages, and kept the adjoining one as a shop. When she died we moved into one, and, when Mum joined us, rented both and made them into one cottage. It must have been a considerable shock to Gran, used to living in a city in a modern house. There was no gas or electricity and we used oil lamps downstairs and candles to light our way to bed. There was an outside lavatory down the garden, with a wooden seat, which had to be emptied periodically. Cooking was done on a three-burner stove, fuelled, I believe, by paraffin. Once a week a lorry came to Kingstone loaded with all manner of provisions: fruit and veg, and paraffin. This was run by Johnnie Ball, and it was from his lorry I had my first ever banana: rare like many things because of the war. Whenever word spread of something scarce becoming available – oranges for instance, anyone who could, usually the women, got on their bikes and went off to Shrivensham, or wherever to get them.

When not in school I don't believe parents worried about where children were. We were hardly ever indoors, and the only warning I can recall was to stay away from Rough Road or we might be taken off by the gypsies who often camped there. I played sometimes with Pat Warner who lived next door, and often in their hen house, at the bottom of their garden. It was a bit scary getting there as they had a pet fox, Trixie, chained in the middle of the garden. The chain was not long enough for her to reach us on the path, but we always doubted that, and ran as fast as we could.

Most of the boys had homemade trolleys: forerunners of today's go-karts. We played hopscotch, skipping, whips and spinning tops, and tag. We went gathering hazel nuts in season as well as blackberrying or collecting mushrooms. The boys played conkers and marbles. At harvest time our legs were sore from playing in the fields full of stubble, and in the winter we had chilblains from being outside too long. When there was snow we took whatever would serve as a toboggan and went up on the downs to risk life and limb! Between Kingston, and the strangely named Zulu there was a stream in one of the fields, in which we used to build up the mud to make dams to provide somewhere to almost swim, in the summer. On another field adjacent to this, the Ashbury football team used to play. Later they moved to a field by Pound Piece. Some lads who were in the army at Shrivensham, played for the club, and used to change in our front room when we lived at Pound Piece. Dad was a sort of first aid man for the team, and used to run on with his bag if anyone went down. I don't think there was much in the bag apart from a wet sponge and some embrocation, but it seemed to do the trick.

I think it must have been VE night when we were taken from our beds to join in the party going on in the street outside. I may have the name wrong, but I think it was Peter Osterreicher playing his accordion and everyone laughing and dancing. Up the road, next to Mrs Tabor's house lived three Germans: Bruno, Heinz and Otto. As POWs they had worked on Spence's farm, and once the war ended they became Displaced Persons. They continued to work on the farm, and took part in village life. Eventually they must have been sent home, but I don't recall that they were in a hurry to go.

When we finished school at 4 o'clock we usually went home by the watercress beds, but in the mornings we came by the Upper Mill, and up the lane. In 1947 the snow was so heavy that it reached the tops of the hedges on either side, so that it felt like walking between great walls of snow.

I can remember when I was quite young being taken to a shop which stood at the entrance to Berrycroft, by my Dad, who bought me a doll there. I hadn't realised, until I spoke to my brother, that many years before that it had housed the Post Office and a bakery as well as the shop. Brian says that when Dad was a lad, and before he went in the navy, he used to be the errand boy for the shop. This sometimes involved taking telegrams to Ashdown House: quite a trek on bike up that hill! Dad was born in 1901 so that would have been around 1916 I think.

Not too long after this we moved to 11, Pound Piece, which was brand new. By this time our parents had joined us, as the house in Portsmouth had been bombed, and Dad had been demobbed. All six of us moved in, and Mum and Gran were delighted to have a modern house, whilst Brian and I ran from room to room switching

lights on: it was such a novelty. I remember the view from the back of the house, which I loved: Mr Halliday's cows grazing in the field, and beyond and above, the downs. Most people grew their own vegetables, and some, like Dad, had allotments as well. When watercress was being cut one of us always went to buy some. When they became available, rabbits caught by ferreting, would be bought to make Gran's rabbit stew. It helped a lot in rationing. Every Sunday morning Dad went down to Kingston to buy our eggs from Margaret Toombs, who lived opposite us when we were in Kingston. She also provided the cockerel we always ordered for Christmas: much more of a treat then when not so easily available. The cottages we had lived in at Kingston were demolished, and the land bought by a builder. I believe he was Bob Irwin, who built his own house in what had been our back garden.

For some events we went to the Mission Hall, run by Mr Edwards. The building was made of corrugated iron, but was quite cosy inside. It always felt a bit strange as I was more familiar with the church. I was in the church choir, and remember that when the Vicar's daughter, Rachel Mortimer, got married we were actually paid to sing at her wedding. I don't think it was much more than two shillings and sixpence, but it seemed a good return to us!

The school was held in what is now the Village Hall. It was divided into three classes. The juniors were in the class nearest the school house and taught by Mrs Collett, who lived in Shrivenham. The senior class was in the middle room, and was taught by the headmaster Mr Duckham, whilst the next room was for the Infants, and Miss White was the teacher. There was a government plea for rosehips to boost the nation's vitamin levels, and we used to collect them from the hedgerows and take them in to school. There was a prize every year for whoever brought in the first bee orchid from the downs, which would probably be discouraged today.

When I passed the 11 plus I used to go on the school bus to the grandly named Faringdon County Grammar School for Girls. Some years ago I took my family to see my old school only to find it no longer existed as a school: such a disappointment.

Both Mum and Gran were good seamstresses, and Mum did dressmaking, alterations, and so on for anyone who wanted it. She often went to some of the larger houses, and if it was during school holidays, I sometimes went with her. I think Mr and Mrs Cash became Sir William and Lady Cash, and I loved sitting in their swinging garden seat in their beautiful walled garden at the Old Vicarage. We also went to Idstone where Mrs MacDowall lived. I thought the house was rather bohemian, as some of the rooms had polished wooden floors, rather than carpets, and, as she was an artist, had her easel and materials around.

Grandad sometimes worked for a painter and decorator from Swindon: I think it was Beard's. One year they were working at Ashdown House and I went to visit. The main thing I remember is an elegant grand staircase. Brian tells me that years ago Ashdown House had large stables, and virtually, its own village, with a school for the children of staff. Gramps, as we called him, was originally a cockney, and a kind and lively character. It seemed to me that could make almost anything. He made wooden dolls' houses and push-along horses for anyone holding raffles looking for a prize. When Dad was demobbed he went to work for Bunce's until his retirement.

During the war there were often concerts in what was then the Village Hall, near the church. Mum and Gran were usually in charge of costumes, and Grandad would always do an act of some kind: I can remember him playing the spoons! Mrs Arbuthnot, who lived at Red Barn above the Ridgeway, was usually in charge of production. I believe she was a writer. One year I played an oyster in a dramatised version of The Walrus and the Carpenter: my "shell" made of brown paper.

Eventually Hollywood came to Ashbury by means of a travelling cinema brought to us on a lorry on Thursday nights. Film shows were put on in the Village Hall. Westerns were very popular with the boys, and our father, but we also had some romance with such films as The Man in Grey or Naughty Marietta. I know people came from around Ashbury to the "cinema" because I remember my future sister in law Brenda, who lived in Bishopstone, being there.

Few of the working classes owned cars when I was a child. I remember Mrs Avenell, who lived in a cottage by the Cross Trees, was available for hire if a trip to Shrivenham station, for instance, was needed, before Dr Beeching stepped in. I think the only colour for cars was black.

When I left school I first went to work at the Swindon Press in Old Town in Swindon, mainly on the switchboard. If I handed in local news, about Womens' Institute meeting for instance, I was paid lineage at one penny per line. Once I interviewed old Mrs Pound for her reminiscences. After a while I left and went to the Royal Military College of Science at Shrivenham to work in Admin. We used to get invitations to the Summer Balls they held for the officers, which was quite exciting, and my only chance to wear a long dress. For dances in Shrivenham, when long dresses were not needed, the only way to get to them was by bike, which some of us often did. Coming home along the unlit roads could be a bit scary when a cow suddenly mooed in the fields.

Miss Lawrence at Idstone Farm started the Girl Guides when I was a teenager, and it was fun. I think Mum helped her as she had fond memories of having been a Sea Guide. Meetings were held at the farm, and I was in Swallow Patrol. Once we went to camp at Foxlease in the New Forest: not so far from where I live now.

The shop opposite the school entrance was also the Post Office, and run by Mr and Mrs Courtney. The other general shop was by the cross roads, and I believe, remains. As I mentioned, Aunt Rose ran a small shop opposite the Rose and Crown, where we always spent our sweet ration. She was a remarkable woman. She brought our father up when his mother died, and her own two sons. When one of them died in a quarry accident near Odstone she brought up his two sons, Michael and Gordon. During the war she housed two evacuees, Bill and Ralph. She could play the violin, and gave me piano lessons, in between running the shop, and looking after Uncle Bob. I wonder if anyone knows about her younger life: it would be so interesting to hear?

I don't think we really questioned the hierarchy in the village, although it was very evident. Those with money had telephones, cars, cleaning ladies, and so on, and the rest of us did not.

My husband John was in the RAF at Watchfield, doing his National Service when we met. Seven months later, when he was due for demob we decided to marry. I was eighteen and he was twenty. We were young enough to need parental permission to marry, and both families had misgivings, as we were young, penniless, and "what did we know?" However that was in 1956 and we are still happily together, fifty five years on. We were married in Ashbury Church and moved to John's home in Southampton soon after. We have a daughter and two sons. Brian lives in Swindon now, with his family. If anyone remembers me they may also share some of the memories I've recounted. I have such fond memories of my country childhood, and of the friends I grew up with and went to school with. I'm reluctant to name them as they might not wish it.



Father and grandfather working in the garden (Harry Simpson and Sam Brattle)



Father Harry in naval uniform, beside Aunt Rose's cottage opposite the Rose and Crown in the 1940's



Florence Simpson in the garden



Sam and Florence Brattle holding Cherille and Brian



Simpson wedding photo: L to R Harry Simpson (Dad) John White (Cherille's husband) Florence Simpson (Mum) Brian Simpson (brother) Brenda Simpson (Bride nee Norman-Thorpe) Edie and Fred Norman-Thorpe (Bride's parents) Bridesmaid Imogen, and page boys Paul and Glyn. [sadly Brenda the bride died 1st April 2012]



Wedding day Cherille and John at Ashbury 20/4/56