

MEMORIES and MEMENTOS of ASHBURY 1940---1962

By Michael C New

“Home” means different things to different people so when I tell my friends I’m going “Home” for the weekend they say but you are already at home having lived here on the outskirts of High Wycombe for the last 50 years. No to me home is where I was born and brought up, it’s where my family and relations are and where I spent the happiest and most idyllic years of my life. I only have one cousin left living in the village now as everyone else has passed away and are buried in the cemetery so when I stand and look around at the headstones it’s like a family reunion, daft I know but that’s where my family are.

To trace the family history my grandparents (Dad’s mum and Dad) Walter Thomas and Helen New were the last tenants of the old cottages at the top of Church Lane before they were converted into the Jubilee Hall. My grandparents moved into the then new council houses in Idstone Road (no.7 later changed to no. 18). Dad (Walter James better known by his nickname ‘Bartley’) lived with Mum (Hilda Rose nee Bunce) in a farm workers cottage at Odstone.

In 1936 Dad decided to leave the farm and went to work for Wm. Bunce & Son. This of course meant they had to move out of the cottage at Odstone but were able to find a house in the village. However it was part of the village shop and post office and part of the agreement was that Mum would help in the shop. The shop at the entrance to Berrycroft was owned by the same people that had the Bourton shop so found it difficult being in two places at once hence after a year or so they left the running of the Ashbury shop to Mum. Of course we all know what happened in 1939 and it wasn’t long before Mum was having to get used to dealing with ration books and coupons and to weighing out what everyone was allowed each week, an ounce of this or two ounces of that. To add to that at the beginning of 1940 she found she was pregnant with yours truly and sure enough at the end of August that year Nurse Philby was called to the shop and I came into this world. Mum went back to working in the shop and then in September 1942 my sister Jill was born at the shop as I was.

We didn’t see a lot of Dad because he was either at work (he was in a reserved occupation) or he was out on home guard duty or on police duty as a special constable. I still have the little badge he had to wear in his lapel saying he was on ‘national service’ otherwise he could have been arrested for not being in the army. As a young man he’d learnt to ring the church bells and as soon as he thought were up to it he taught both myself and my sister to ring them as well. After the death of Tommy Daniels he took over as sexton and verger until he finally retired in the early 1980s.

We had two evacuees billeted with us and mum told us later that whilst the older boy tried hard to fit in with country life they found it difficult coming from the East End his brother was the opposite a real nightmare.

Life changed again in 1944 when the shop went up for sale and we had to move. It had been agreed for us to move in with my grandparents in Idstone Road but sadly granny died the day before we were due to move in. Dad was reluctant to carry on but granddad put his foot down saying “ carry on as planned it’s what your mother would have wanted”.

A year later the war came to an end, my brother BILL was born at Idstone Road in May 45 and I started school in the September. I can’t remember a thing about the infant class or the teacher at the time but I do remember Mrs Collett who taught the middle class. A lovely lady who did her utmost to get through to us kids. I only wish the same could be said for Harry Duckham, a strict disciplinarian but not a very good teacher. Once we heard he was leaving it was with some trepidation we awaited his replacement especially when we were told he was a former R A F squadron leader, who was used to men doing as he told them straight away. We couldn’t have been more wrong, even though he was the only man ever to cane me I’m still convinced Jack Clark was the finest teacher ever to set foot inside Ashbury School. One of the first things he did was to send some of us older boys up to Mr Halliday’s dairy opposite the war memorial every morning to collect to small bottles of milk for the younger ones. We thought of this as a bit of a perk being able to skip off lessons for a short while.

I can still see the faces of many of Dad’s workmates as they walked to and from Bunce’s yard each day. Men like Bert Giggs, Henry Tilling, Roly Coles, Walley Stallard, Charlie Walsh, Earnest (soldier) New also the boys and girls that

were in my class, the likes of Bob Tilling, Michael Fitchett, Michael Winley, Ashley Disbury, Marian Tilling, Brian Simpson to name just a few.

As mentioned previously the day the pub burnt down was the day before I was due to be christened and my uncles had to carry my pram over the charred beams in the Lane to get me up to the church. My uncle never let me forget that.

Another small piece of Ashbury I have is a piece of the original Cross Trees. Like the Elms in Church Lane the Cross Trees also became dangerous and had to be cut down for safety reasons. Dad picked up a small limb and brought it home but it wasn't big enough to do anything with so I cut it into small pieces polished them and gave them away as mementoes. I still have two of them sitting on the shelf in front of me.

All young boys have dreams of meeting a wartime hero but few ever achieve it so imagine the surprise I got after morning service one Sunday when a man asked to meet the choir to say thankyou. He shook hands with everyone then turned and simply said "thankyou you sang beautifully". After he had gone the vicar said for anyone who doesn't know that was Mr Airey Neave the first British Officer to successfully escape from Colditz.

In 1958 a young lad by the name of David Walsh sat down at the end of what is now the cemetery and painted a picture of the church, basically the tower end. It finished up in a jumble sale in the village for which Mum paid the sum of £1. When I left Ashbury she gave me that picture and it's hung on my wall ever since. A scene of Ashbury that will never be seen again.

My final memento is a Crown piece (5 shillings in old money, 25p today). As Cherille mentioned the vicars daughter Rachel Mortimer decided to get married around about 1953/4. Yes she did "pay" the choir but with a gift of a Crown piece which had been minted to commemorate the coronation. She went to the bank and ordered one each for the entire choir. The wedding was conducted by the bride's uncle who at that time was the Bishop of Exeter. I know I am right about this because it was my job to carry the processional cross in front of the choir. The cross was fairly new as it had been donated to the memory of Sylvia Bunce who was tragically killed in a road accident.

No, Ashbury will never be the same village it was 50 years ago but for over the first 20 years of my life it was and always will be "Home"