

Chapter 4

Life in post war England was a bit of a shock for us.

I think we started at 28 St Gabriel's but soon got a flat in the same block of flats a Sheila Feeney in Draycott Avenue. Sheila was a friend of my mother from way back; I think they met on a cruise when very young. She was one of the secretaries to Cecil Beeton and was reputed to be the only person who could decipher his writing. She did most of the typing of his books. She was well in with the gay crowd and quite fun. To be gay in those days was a criminal offence so it was never spoken of.

From that flat I remember going to The Round Pond in Hyde Park¹, I think I had a model boat. This period could not have lasted long. We then went to stay in Buxted. Buxted held quite a high importance for me at this time so something has to be said about it.

The Battle of Britain was a period of intense German bombing during the period June to October 1940. The aim was to destroy the British political set up and force an armistice, alternatively destroy the Royal Air Force in preparation for Operation Sealion, the landing of German forces on British soil. Our air force held out but London suffered much damage. From St Gabriel's my Grandmother could see the intense glow of London in flames. She asked my Grandfather if she could buy a place in the country. The very next day, she drove to Sussex, using many of her petrol coupons, and bought "Headley", Limes Lane, Buxted².

"Headley" was a cottage set well back from the road; it had about 1 1/2 acres of ground about a mile from the village. There was a short-cut across the cowslip covered field. We had a telephone at the bottom of the stairs which was the "stick" type with one earpiece on a flex.

The kitchen was cream and green; we had one of those all-in-one cupboards with an enamel work top that pulled out with drawers below. The coal fired boiler was in the kitchen, presumably it gave hot water but I doubt that we had central heating. I still have a few items of tea-ware Royal Staffordshire "Springtime" (pattern number R15869) which we used daily; it was ideal for this cottage setting. We had an inglenook with a fire-screen which was a tapestry of a seagull done from a kit by Granny. I have the smell of wood-smoke, coal and polish as well as the fresh earth outside. It was a great place to live. The living room was divided from the dining area by a full length blue velvet curtain which made the place cosy. On the left of the front door was a mimosa tree, whenever it flowered we always got snow which fell off the roof and broke the tree. On the west wall was a magnificent climbing, scented red rose. The path to the front door had an avenue of fir trees which got overgrown and had to be cut down.

At the back was a big greenhouse and allotment garden which my grandfather enjoyed. It also provided much needed produce. There was a small pond near the bushes that screened the orchard area. Outside the kitchen door was an Anderson Shelter³ which became full of water and was abandoned. Behind us were just fields. During the war if the German bombers had not found their target in London they would jettison their bombs on the return journey, some of these bombs fell not too far away. Behind the garage was a "blue fir" which was planted on the marriage of my Uncle Ted to Kathleen, it was there in 2004, I wonder if it is still there? Woodpeckers and owls, including barn owls were commonly seen. Moles dug up the lawn. We had a gardener who came weekly, his name was "Barton"; he had a strong Sussex accent which probably does not exist now. In my Grandmother's bedroom was a sewing

¹ One can easily spend a day in the park, see all the statues and take a row boat. Diana's memorial.

² Try entering CN22 4PB into Google

³ Look it up

basket, it was topped by a china “doll” with a full skirt which covered the basket. The china doll part sits at the top of our stairs as I write this. The owner now (2008) is Mrs Nettleton. Her husband was a Queen’s Messenger⁴

We stayed in Buxted for several months. What my mother did to support us I don’t know however I went to school there. I remember winter days but also summer days so we may have been there for nine or ten months, if not longer.

The village school was also the scout hut on the playing field opposite the station. There were only about fifteen of us, there were two rooms and a stove in the centre. Kay May was our teacher. By coincidence the May family were our neighbours.

Helen her sister was a graphic designer and had some designs accepted by Sanderson’s, the wall paper people. Her brother was a Mongol (Downs Syndrome), who kept a diary. I am sure that it would be a valuable document as it covered the war years; in truth I suspect that it only recorded his feelings. Their mother seemed to me to be a great age.

Their cottage, called “Rutts Hall”, was older than Headley and had a beautiful cottage garden. They had an old horse drawn caravan in the field in which David Stevenson and I stayed once, for a couple of weeks. We had a great time there but that must have been in the late 1950.s

I remember “Thead’s” the grocer; Granny had an account there as well as at Mr Moon the butcher. Thead’s sold practically everything, there were hessian sacks of goods, ironmongery of course and each item wrapped in a twist of paper or a paper bag; no plastic in those days. Above all the smell was sweet and spicy. By co-incidence much later, when working in Guildford, there was a lady working there who had survived an air crash in Libya, she and her husband bought Theads, and went to live there, I don’t think it was a shop when they bought it.

I think that my mother and I spent a Christmas with the Mays once, the stairs were really steep and ceilings low. They had a toad in a hole near the pond, it lived there for years.⁵

When very young I had a teddy bear. I was persuaded to give it to someone who lived down the lane; I had been invited to the party. Their house was on a bend of the road towards the village. I really wish I still had that teddy.

This time was reasonably happy I think, I was too young to understand.

⁴ Find out what he does

⁵ How long does a toad live?