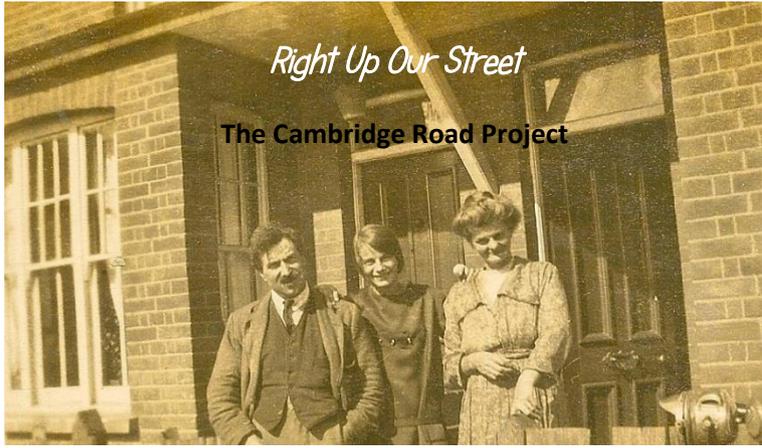


Fleetville Diaries Oral History Project



Diane Penstone-Smith



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Born April 6th 1947 in St Albans

Interviewed by Liz Bloom and Romaine Hutchison in August 2015

Early Days

My grandparents lived in Ely Road and then moved to 5 Cambridge Road sometime before 1939 and, when my parents were married in '45, they rented rooms in Number 3 Cambridge Road from a Mrs McCrea. It was very difficult for them! Anyway, Mrs McCrea moved out, the house became vacant and my parents bought it for, I think, £600.

I was born on April 6th 1947 at St Olive's Nursing Home. The winter of '46 and '47 had been dreadful and I can remember my mother saying that she had to climb over the snow to get into the car to get to the nursing home. She was in there for a fortnight and when she came out, everybody was in summer dresses! It had just turned! We had the hottest summer we had known for ages. I remained an only child even though my mother would have loved more children. My father, however, was worried that there might be another war.

My father had worked at Peake's since he left school at 14. There were so many industries just in this small area. There was Nicholson's, the Rubber Works, Campfield Press, and lots of people worked at DeHavilland. It was a busy area really.

Childhood

I had a very happy childhood. We played hopscotch in the street. We'd skip, we played tag and hide-and-seek. Everybody knew everybody and there were no real behaviour problems because if anybody was bad, the parents all knew one another and they might say, "Can you stop your daughter doing that?" or "Can you do this...?" Lots of those people who lived in Cambridge Road had lived there themselves as children; my dad had lots of friends around who he'd been to school with. There were quite a number of children of different ages and we all used to play. Some of the children I went to school with lived in Hedley Road or College Road and you'd meet up with them and play. You were never bored as a child, although we didn't have computers; there was always something going on. I went to Camp School where the headmaster was Mr Hill; he had been headmaster when my father had been there. When Mr Hill left, Mr Belcher took the headship. The Fancy Dress was very good; Barry Atkinson, who was there with me, his mother was so good at making fancy dress costumes and they always won. I can still remember when Barry and his brother went at the Bisto Twins; I can still see them today. It was such a happy time! I always thought it was a lovely time to be alive. I didn't get into the Grammar School so I went to Hatfield School; I don't know why. In those days, if you passed the 11 Plus and you couldn't get into the Grammar, they'd send you to Hatfield School which was next to the Technical College.

On November 5th, the whole of the lower part of Cambridge Road used to get together for a firework party on what is now Pickford Road. We had a great big bonfire just behind my grandfather's hedge. We were told to be very careful that none of the fireworks went near the Co-op garage. Of course, we all had our cars in garages along Pickford Road too.

The House and Garden

There was no central heating in the house, of course. I can remember that often we would wake up in the morning to see the frost thick on the window. Mum would often put a Valor paraffin heater in the room and if the wick 'caught', it would smoke; awful things really.

The back gardens in Cambridge Road were beautiful and very long. They were divided into half; you had the flower garden, then the trellis with roses and then a massive area for vegetables. Of course, during the war, the vegetables were grown and my grandfather kept chickens at the bottom of the garden. Because my father and grandfather lived next door to one another, they used the bottom area to build a great big chicken coop that went right the way across. They kept bantams rather than chickens. Bantams are smaller, more productive, and they lay nice little eggs. The days were different. My father would come home for lunch and I came home from school for lunch too. In the evening when he came home, he would have a tea and then go out and do some gardening. My mother would be outside as well; she'd be watering or doing whatever needed to be done. I'm not saying we were self-sufficient but we grew potatoes, cabbages, Brussels sprouts and beans; everything was there. My grandparents had apple trees in their garden as well.

Out and About

We had coal delivered to our coal shed and I can remember my dad boarding it in to keep the coal back. My grandad would count the sacks in to make sure we had the right amount. I can remember, as a child, going down to the gas works for the coke for the fires; I would have been very small because it must have been directly after the war. I can also remember accumulators (storage batteries). Directly opposite Camp School, there used to be Mr Hilliard's off licence on the corner of College Road and Camp Road. I had the job of taking the accumulators into the shop in the morning and at night time I'd take them back to my grandparents. I can remember Mr Oakley coming round with his horse and cart to deliver the milk. He had a farm where the Orchard Nursing Home is now on Camp Road. I can also recall Mr Baum who owned the farm where Cunningham Hill Road is. He was quite wealthy and I remember one day he went out on a shoot with some of his friends and he came back and put all the birds he had shot out on the grass; I can remember walking by and thinking, "Look at all those dead birds!" That was the fifties and life was so different. By the way, years later I became a teacher and my first job was at Cunningham Hill School, which was useful when I was living in Cambridge Road.

My grandmother was a big member of St Luke's Church and she had the job of delivering the parish magazine. St Luke's was on Camp Road then. At Camp School, we would have our assemblies at St Luke's and country dancing with Mr Belcher.

The Shops and the Neighbours

Our neighbours at Number 1 were Mr and Mrs Bates who were grandparents – that sort of age. I can't remember his first name but his wife, Doris was an absolute poppet; a sweet-natured woman who I always used to call Aunt Bates. One of their sons separated from his wife and they left their son, Trevor, with Mr and Mrs Bates, so Trevor was brought up by the grandparents. He was slightly younger than me and because he was a grandchild, he was given quite a lot of materialistic things. I should think he had every cowboy outfit you could have! He had every head-dress and cowboy hat you could imagine, or so it seemed to me. I would go next door and play and I always had to be the Indian so I would have a feather in a band round my head, my father made me a bow and arrow and I had a little red bag that I used as a holster if I was a cowboy.

The Bates had an Alsatian called Ricky which was not a nice dog at all. If they went away and left the dog, it was only my grandfather who would volunteer to look after the dog. Trevor's father returned for a short spell and he started to learn the trumpet. My father would make fun of him and say, "If you play that trumpet once more at night, I'll knock on the wall!" We were always knocking on the wall in those days! Anyway, one night, we heard this scratch scratching on the window and my mother asked, "What on earth is that?" When we pulled back the curtain, there was the Alsatian. My dad said, "Oh God, I'd better get Eric round to collect this dog because I'm not going out to tackle it." But at that particular moment, Eric started playing his trumpet and dad started bashing on the wall. Almost immediately the trumpet stopped but the dog is still there in the garden. Eventually, I think, my dad plucked up enough courage to take the dog home.

Opposite us, on the corner of Ely Road was a little sweet shop next to the post box which is still there. It was owned by two ladies called the Miss Collins. On the opposite corner of Ely Road was a butcher's and next to the butcher was Stan Marsh the shoe mender. Then there was a hairdresser's, Fleetville Saloons, owned by Percy Hall, who was very friendly with my dad. Actually, there was a family called Hall that lived near us and I think they were related to Percy's family. Their daughter, Susan, was a year younger than me and I used to play with her a lot. I can always remember that she had an old doll's pram; she obviously had an older sister who had passed it down to her. I would think, "What an old doll's pram that is!" I had a brand new one but that didn't matter, of course. I can still see her old doll's pram today. It was a brown colour while we had new blue or grey ones with smart chrome.

I think there was a builder called Mr Grimes who lived next door to the hairdresser. Then, I think there were two more houses before the Co-op; there was the grocery and the butcher's. Then you went round to Gordon Price, the greengrocer on Camp View Road. Opposite the Co-op shop at the bottom of Camp View Road was another butcher's shop. There were three butcher's shops within yards of one another.

The fish and chip shop at the very end of Cambridge Road on our side was owned by the Greys. Jum (he was known as Jumbo) and Margaret Grey lived on Oxford Avenue and they would come down and cook the fish and chips. In the house adjoining the fish shop Jum's mother, Mrs Grey, lived with her daughter Mercia. Mercia was deaf and dumb and as a child I used to be fascinated by her. Although my grandmother was deaf, as a child I hadn't come across many severely deaf people in those days. Incidentally, Mrs Grey kept bulldogs and Pekineses. The mouth of the bulldog was just like Jum's!

Round the corner from them, on Sutton Road, was the bread shop, Morley's. The shop on the corner of Maxwell Road and Cambridge Road was, I think, called Webb's and then the Gregorys took it over as a sweet shop and I think they sold other things too. We went there for ice creams but otherwise, I suppose, if I wanted sweets I went opposite to the Miss Collins' shop. There were lots of jars of sweets, aniseed balls, liquorice pipes and that sort of thing. I always remember that they had a chewing gum machine put up outside; now this was fantastic – Wriggley's Spearmint! Now you put a penny in and you turned the handle and every fourth one, it gave you another free packet. Now because it had an arrow on it, I'd worked out that if the arrow was pointing to you, you always got the extra chewing gum. I would wait until the arrow was pointing in the right direction before using it.

The nearest telephone box to us was outside the Post Office on the corner of Cell Barnes Lane and Camp Road, where the Village Store is now.

In the late '50s I think Mr Bates must have died because eventually Number 1 was sold to the sister of Jum Grey, Gwen Conway. Her husband, Mark, was the brother of Margaret Grey (Jum's wife). Mark and Margaret came from Ireland and they were lovely. Mark and Gwen had three girls; Vivien, Judy and Charmelle. Vivien became a hairdresser and when she married, she came to live in a caravan in the garden at Number 1. I think they knocked the fence down at the bottom of Pickford Road and brought the caravan in that way. I think they got rid of their vegetable garden and they had this big static van in the garden. Actually, it sounds awful but it was a very nice caravan and the system worked very well. The Conway's did so much renovation to Number 1; they knocked out the outside toilet and coal house and extended the kitchen. They had a lovely kitchen and the caravan fitted very neatly in the garden. The second daughter, Judy, married Clive Bryson whose parents owned the shop directly opposite where the Miss Collins had their shop, on the corner of Ely Road and Cambridge Road. Charmelle was a year younger than me and went to Townsend School ... and then, in about 1970, we moved away from Cambridge Road.

When my grandfather died, my grandmother moved in with us from Number 5 into Number 3 but the house wasn't big enough and we needed more space so we moved into a new bungalow on the corner of Colney Heath Lane and Hatfield Road.

What Might Have Been

Between the wars Ely Road wasn't made up. My grandfather rented land for growing fruit and vegetables alongside the road and paid the rent 'to the bank'. I don't know whether the bank owned the land or whether he just paid a landlord through the bank. Anyway, one day they came round and they said to my grandfather, "You're paying a minimal rent here. Why don't you buy this off us? You can have it dirt cheap, we don't want it; it's an inconvenience really." My grandfather asked my grandmother what she thought about it and, always a very cautious lady, she said, "Well, I don't know Bert. If we buy the land, we would be responsible for making up the road and we don't want all that expense, do we?" So he said no.

It's easy to look back with hindsight but just think about the amount of money they could have made. Indeed, when numbers 1 and 7 Cambridge Road came up for sale on different occasions, my father was offered them but he said no too. If he'd owned those four houses, just think about the amount of money he would have made! But they really didn't want the commitment; they were very happy with their lot as it was.