

Turning back the Clock - Memoirs of a Snelgate Childhood

By Brian Thompson

In 1938, at the age of 2 years, I moved with my family to No 2 Snelgate Cottages - in those days a prized council house and the epitome of working class ambition. We had moved from Bones Cottages, West Clandon, the house in which I was born. I don't remember that house but the new one had facilities we'd never had - a flush toilet and a real bathroom. Captain Goodhart-Rendel, the local squire who lived in great splendour at Hatchlands was the eminent architect who had built them to the highest specifications of the day. Although we had a bathroom there was no running hot water as of course there was no gas or electricity supply. Electricity finally arrived in East Clandon well after the end of the second world war and my mother could dispense with the solid fuel burning copper for boiling the bath water, which had never worked properly.

Snelgate Cottages stood right on the main Guildford to Leatherhead road without the bank which today separates the two. Our twelve houses always seemed self-sufficient and slightly separated from the tightly-knit village itself. Over fifty years later, I sometimes have difficulty in remembering what happened yesterday but have none in recalling the names and house numbers of every family at Snelgate in those days.

The next door family, the Shippes, included five children and I was pleased and astonished to find Pauline, the youngest of these, living in our old house, number 2, when I paid a visit a couple of years ago. One of the great unifying elements was the village school where we were taught by the wonderful Miss Lake. With such a small number of children there were just two classes - seniors and infants and the teaching was thorough but basic. My years at East Clandon village school were of course dominated by the war and most of what I remember about my education there centres on events concerning this. We had watched the dog fights of the so-called Battle of Britain from the school playground and therefore a particularly vivid memory is of an ex-pupil, by then a Spitfire pilot, who gave us a presentation of his splendidly evocative pencil drawings from firsthand experience.

For us children the war brought unexpected but wonderful benefits to East Clandon. One of these was the influx of 'evacuees' from London. A dozen or more children were billeted with families in the village, most of their parents staying in London, despite the risks. The school roll probably doubled in size and the older children were able to muster a full football team to play West Clandon or West Horsley. I often wonder what happened to several of these youngsters who shared our village life for such a short, but probably very important, period. The boy I was closest to was called Peter Cready and in recent years I have searched in vain for his name on the various internet sources etc. Does anyone know if any of these people have ever been in touch with the village or any of its present residents? They certainly left their mark on the village, particularly in the case of the two spinster sisters who had given Peter a home and their next-door neighbours who were amazingly kind to two vulnerable brothers. The abrupt ending of loving relationships was a tragedy to many people at the end of the war.

The second important event to occur out of the war was the arrival to the north of the village of large numbers of Canadian soldiers. Although they may not have been as glamorous as the Yanks they were certainly a breath of fresh air to us kids and to the teenage girls in particular. My elder sister married a Canadian soldier in the village church and spent the rest of her life in Vancouver. Apart from this dramatic affect on me of my big sister disappearing the Canadians had a major impact on the village social life. Despite the restrictions of the blackout and shortages of petrol or alcohol, lively 'socials' were regularly held in the old village hall, in those days just a glorified wooden hut. Some of the drama caused by the Canadian troops was a bit blacker. Several of the 'war widows' in the village were known to 'entertain' these allies. The most blatant example was that of the mother of a village friend of mine whose father had been exempted war service by dint of working on the land - a 'reserved' occupation. It didn't stop his wife cuckolding him in the grand manner by regularly meeting her soldier lover in the woods at High Clandon, quite often spied on by her son and his mates. The product was another brother for my friend. Her husband must have known but

was a marvellously calm and unruffled man who seemed to take it, and the resulting extra mouth to feed, in his stride.

During my father's absence in the Eighth Army my mother continued to work as a domestic servant in various of the large houses in the area. Despite the wartime deprivations these houses and their privileged occupants had to be looked after. My mother had originally been 'in service' with one family at West Clandon. When she married and moved from the bosom of this family she shared her wartime labours amongst three families - one of them being the Sykes family at New Manor farm. The Sykes family were the closest we came to having an involved 'lord of the manor'. Sykes was a self-made business man and farmer in contrast to the old-money landed gentry, the Goodhart-Rendels. My mother cleaned and cooked - or skivvied as she put it - for this family and for two other families in Guildford. One of these was the Gates family of Cow & Gate dairy products fame and the other the family she had been 'in service' to who had downsized to a ten-bedroom house in Guildford. Having a mother who worked during the war gave my sister and myself a great deal of freedom and interest. In those days of petrol rationing the Gates's would pick my mother up in the first electric car anyone had seen and she came close to death in their house when a V2 rocket landed in the garden.

On the many occasions when my mother had to work in the evening - presumably looking after the dinner guests of her employers - my sister and myself were looked after by the mother of David Rumbold, my closest friend at Snelgate. David was a year or so older than me but we had quite a lot in common. David's father was older than most of the village fathers and was not therefore away fighting. He was the village air-raid warden who would throw sand over the odd incendiary bomb which missed its target of the London to Portsmouth railway line, and warned us when our window 'blackout' was leaking. My grandparents lived in Stuart Cottage in Back Lane and my grandfather worked as a farm labourer for Mr Sykes. I had several uncles, all of whom were in the various services. My favourite uncle George was persuaded to volunteer for the Royal Navy by an old salt who lived at number 4 Snelgate. He was killed when the unsinkable 'Hood' blew up with only three survivors and his name is engraved on the village war memorial together with that of Mr Shipp, our neighbour.

Although the education at the village school was necessarily limited, David and myself shared many interests and somehow seemed to gain more from the primary school experience than most of our schoolmates. We would roam the unspoilt countryside around Snelgate which teemed with wildlife. We would help with bringing in the crop at harvest time and in my early teens I'm ashamed to say I acted as a beater for the very amateur shots on the pheasant shoots organised by Lord Bowater. I am mortified to find much of this idyllic countryside now covered by a golf course. Both sets of our parents had high hopes that we would pass the dreaded 'eleven plus' and go to grammar school. We both had elder sisters who had passed this divisive examination and there was a very real competition between our families. When I passed and followed David to the RGS I had very mixed feelings because of the loss of all my village friends who would go on to Send 'Secondary Modern'.

As a teenager the advantage of living on the 'main' road was that the 408 or 432 bus would take me to the fleshpots of Guildford, where due to shortage of money we would mostly hang around the bus station impressing each other, or the odd girlfriend, with the extravagance of our Edwardian or 'teddy-boy' dress. All of this put to an end by national service.

Because of the age difference and the gaining of many like-minded friends at the RGS, David and myself lost contact as teenagers. I was aware that David had emigrated to Canada and joined the Air Force. A couple of years ago I discovered the East Clandon web-site to which my old mate of over fifty years ago had added his memories of schooldays in East Clandon. Thanks to the wizardry of Peter Smart I miraculously made contact with David (now a US 'Dave') and a few weeks ago we met briefly in 'The Queen's Head'. He was still the affable personality I remember from all those years ago and hopefully we will be swapping e-mails and the odd visit in future years.

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