

Memories of Childhood Holidays in Robertsbridge 1949 to 1958
(and subsequent visits)

The first time I visited Robertsbridge, the village where my mother Edith Thompson (nee Butcher) was born and raised, was when I was Christened at St Mary's Salehurst on 12th March 1944. This was probably the first time she had returned to the village since the start of WW11. She and her husband to be, John, were both working in London when the war broke out and when they got married in August 1940 she could not return to Robertsbridge for the ceremony because, with the fear of an imminent Invasion, Robertsbridge was inside the Restricted Zone. Only pass-carrying locals and the military were allowed inside it. Edith had been Christened and Confirmed at St Mary's but she had to marry in London. Her parents Percy and Ethel could travel up to London to be there and, as her sister was also in London at the time, she did have a bridesmaid!

After the War in 1946 my father obtained a Works Manager position in Lancashire. He stayed there in 'digs' until our house was ready for occupation in Spring 1947. During this time my mother, my younger brother and I stayed with my grandparents at 2 Norman Villas – Edith's childhood home.

My earliest memories are of the hard snowy Winter of 1946/7 and walking down with Grandad to feed his chickens in his allotment behind the Blacksmith's Forge with old socks worn over my wellies. Easter 1947 saw a colleague of dad's drive down from Lancashire to collect us and take us to our new home. The thaw had set in by then and my only memory of the journey is seeing water come up through the floor of the car on a number of occasions! Presumably I was asleep most of the time.

My father was an orphan (Spanish Flu and a heart attack) so Percy and Ethel Butcher were my only grandparents and living over 250 miles away from me. Until I was 13 years old my annual holiday was 4 weeks of the Summer spent in Robertsbridge. Mum would take us down initially by overnight coach to Victoria Coach Station and later by train during the day. After 2 weeks Dad would join us as his factory closed for the annual Wakes Weeks break. As the coach arrived in London before the first Hastings train we would spend some time in the London Parks – Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens etc. When we did arrive by train at Euston we would often walk through London to Charing Cross. All extremely exciting for a child being brought up in the smoke, smog, noise and grime of a Lancashire Mining Community and its Engineering Factories and Cotton Mills.

My brother and I soon got to know the names of all the stations and when we saw Frant and then Etchingham we knew we were almost there. Gran would usually be there to meet us and after something to eat we would be sent upstairs to calm down and sleep. We had the large front bedroom at Norman Villas – no bathroom or inside toilet then – with a view north across the valley. The next day we would be taken along to No 4 Norman Villas to see Aunt Nell, 'Aunt' Ciss and our bed-ridden Great Grandma Butcher. (It was many years later that I actually knew her name -Alice)

We soon got to know and play with the village children and, indeed, each year in July my Gran would have little visitors asking when Brian and Keith with their strange accents would be coming down.

As the Lancashire summer holidays started a week before those of Sussex we didn't get to meet up with our village friends until the afternoons when we would walk up to meet them at Salehurst C. of E. School as they finished for the day. When I think now of all these young children walking on their own along what, even then, was quite a busy road and crowding around the Tuck Shop on the way, I'm amazed that there weren't any accidents. Once their school holidays started one or more of the village children would come knocking on the door of 2 Norman Villas to ask if we were coming out to play.

Mr Amies (Tommy?) lived at 1 Norman Villas. He was the village Barber and Grandfather to the two Amies boys. (This September 2020 I saw his name revealed above the shop which he rented next to the old Post Office as the weather had worn away the ones that had been placed above it). Whilst I have forgotten many of the children's names as well as the Amies boys there were Michael and David Morley (known as Dub) whose father was the village milkman. They lived on the High Street next to Westminster Bank. As the bank building was built into their house their front room was just the width of the door and the small window next to it – it did open up as you got to the back. This house was not as small as one on the right-hand side of Fair Lane

where one of the other boys lived with his family! There was also a Willard, another boy known as 'Dumbell' and quite a few others.

We would generally start off by the cricket pitch to climb trees beyond the football pitch or go through the Railway bridge and make 'dens' in the undergrowth and bushes. You could also walk under the mainline and turn left above the track coming out through a farm onto the road just above the station. Then, possibly, up to Granny Bishop's down and round behind the wood yard and back into the village. Playing cricket on the Cricket Ground was always popular. Chalking the stumps on an old roller as the wicket. As Grandad worked at Gray Nichols up on Brightling road I had a Gray Nichols bat. This came in handy as one afternoon an older boy was using my bat, hit the ball and a corner of the bat flew off – game over! Grandad had the 'faulty' bat replaced immediately but I recall that later that day, when I was having my bath in the tin bath in the kitchen this boy came up to the house to speak to my grandfather to explain and apologise for what had happened. I'd obviously told Grandad that it was me! One day we walked as a group on a very hot day to Darvell Reservoir. We walked all the way on the road passing Mountfield and the overhead waste carrying line at the Gypsum mine (reminding me of the Pits at home!). When we came back my Grandad was astonished that the village children didn't know the cross-country paths which would have halved the journey! The Gravel Pit in Fair Lane and the woods beyond were also wonderful places to play and have 'adventures'. For more structured amusement we would go to the annual Fête at the Sanatorium at Darvell Hall (now the Bruderhof and their Toy making etc.) and/or the Catholic Church Fête at Hurst Green. This was quite a big event thanks, I think, to local resident Lord Longford who, one particular year had obtained the services of Ben Lyon, Bebe Daniels-Lyon and their two children to open the Fête. I was very excited to be sitting next to them playing (I think) some form of Bingo. Both Ben Lyon and Bebe Daniels had been famous Hollywood stars largely before the 'talkies' but now were on the BBC radio in a very popular family sitcom – 'Life with the Lyons'. I was equally excited to win a prize which included cigarettes. Not something my parents would have approved of even if I'd been much older!

Before my father came down to join us I would go with Grandad to watch the village cricket and, more excitingly, go down to the Cycle Speedway Track at night to watch the local team compete with that of another village. These cyclists would be amazed at the lightness and speed of current racing cycles – not to mention the Velodromes!

My brother Keith and I probably saw more of the Morley boys than the other children. Michael was around my age and David the same age as Keith. Michael passed to go to Bexhill Grammar School but, for some reason, returned to the new Secondary Modern School above the station the next year. Michael and I kept in touch by letter for a while (so much easier to do this electronically these days!). He joined the RAF at 16 and was married at 17. I last saw David hurtling on his bicycle down from the Secondary Modern School as I was walking on my own up to catch a train back up to London and home when I was 14.

Once my father had come down for the second fortnight of our holiday, we would regularly all go out together. Off to Hastings by bus or steam train. Sometimes Gran would come down with us and she would arrange for her elder sister Ness to come over on the bus from Eastbourne. Mum had an old school friend, Nora, living in Bexhill married to a postman. She and Mum had been at Salehurst School together and both won scholarships to Tonbridge High School for Girls. They, and another Nora from Hurst Green (she had to walk to Etchingham for the train!) plus a number of other 'country girls' were collectively known as 'The Railway Children'. By all accounts the time on the train was not always spent doing homework – especially as the girls reached Sixth Form! To visit 'Auntie Nora' we would go by train to Bexhill West if we were meeting on the Front with Nora and her boys or get off at Sidley if we were going to her house. This involved catching the Hastings train and changing at Crowhurst to take the branch line to Bexhill travelling over a magnificent viaduct on the short journey. The little Tank Engine and carriages were even older than those on the K&E.S. R but the Terminus was rather grand for such a little Branch Line. This line is not even shown on my 1893 map of Sussex yet some 70 years later both it and the viaduct would be gone!

I would still get up early, have a boiled egg breakfast with Grandad before we fed the chickens and he went off to work. I would walk with my father into the village to get a newspaper before we went out (Grandad got his delivered by Bob and Ivy Cooper's son) and remember us once encountering Malcolm Muggeridge who bade us a cheery 'good morning'. Robertsbridge and the surrounding area have long attracted well known characters. My mother saw Rudyard Kipling catching the London train from Robertsbridge - 1st Class of

course. The Film Actor, Harry Andrews lived at Salehurst and once, when blackberrying on the site of the old Salehurst Halt, Lesley and I passed 'the time of day' with him as he walked his little dog. Of course, the famous feminist and joint founder of Girton College, Barbara Bodichon lived at Scalands. Most of the Pre-Raphaelites including Dante Gabriel Rossetti were her regular visitors and guests.

Occasionally Mum's sister Daphne would come down from London with my cousins who were the same ages as Keith and I. The grown-ups would chat and we would go to play around the Cricket ground. What is now quite a good play park was just two swings but it was enough for us! The field between the cricket ground and the woods was then cultivated and the wigwam like haystacks were excellent play areas! Once, before coming down to Robertsbridge we had stayed a few days in Harrow with Auntie Daphne and the girls. I remember seeing all the sights I'd only read about. The Tower of London, the Bloody Tower, Armoury, St Paul's Cathedral and the Whispering Gallery, Westminster Abbey and the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, Buckingham Palace and a trip on the River Thames to Hampton Court. Plus, the general excitement of being in our Capital City despite the 'bomb sites'.

On our later briefer visits to Gran and Grandad we got used to hearing the reverberating sound of the noisy Diesel Railcars that replaced the steam, Schools Class, drawn passenger trains. The old massive Q1 Steam Engines pulling freight wagons being defunct as freight now went mainly by road!

As a family I think we enjoyed our holidays in Robertsbridge as much as anywhere else in the UK.

By this time, I had a young sister and we were having our summer holidays elsewhere in the UK and visiting Robertsbridge and my grandparents at Easter and October half-term. It was in October 1958 that I contracted Mumps and had to stay at Norman Villas when the family went home.

I was off school for two weeks under the care of the local doctor (I forget his name but he was very tall and had to duck to enter my bedroom). As I improved, I would go walking with Grandad as he exercised his corgi dog (Judy). Along lanes and across fields that he would have walked when his Grandad was the tenant at Redlands Farm before and after the turn of the 19th Century. Although he was severely gassed in action in WW1 and suffered several shrapnel wounds he never spoke about his experiences, but then I never asked. It was November 1958, 40 years after the end of WW1 and with a lot of references to it in the press and radio (they did not have a TV) and the stressing of the Gung-Ho attitude of the early volunteers upset him. He wanted me to be aware that not everyone then thought it was a great idea for British and German workers to kill each other in a Dynastic Squabble. When he was called up in 1917, he did go and 'do his bit', I am sure bravely, and he volunteered to stay on in 1919 to assist in the repatriation on German prisoners.

I continued to visit Robertsbridge every year. Initially with my parents, then with mates and even a girlfriend (a weekend in May so we could watch Wigan Rugby League Team play, and often win, the Challenge Cup at Wembley Stadium.) In July 1963 I had a 2-week holiday with Gran (Grandad had died 3 years earlier) taking a friend down. He was amazed at the greenery of the countryside and to hear so many French speakers in the Old Pumphouse in Hastings Old Town – he felt that he was abroad! For that holiday I had driven down in my battered 1958 Austin A40, but I returned in a 1956 3-litre Mercedes Automatic 3 litre saloon which I had bought at St John's Cross Garage.

There have not many years that my wife and I have not been down to Sussex and I still have one cousin living in Lewes.

I first took Lesley to the village when we were staying with my Uncle Hugh at Ringmer before we were married. Subsequently we stayed with my Great Aunt Nell (Nell Turner) after she had moved to 2 Saxon Terrace where she lived until her death in her 90th year – 1976. We even stayed at the Seven Stars once! Very eerie after Closing Time – we certainly didn't leave our room at night!

We have stayed at Ninfield and Battle with our children many times – always visiting Robertsbridge and calling on Ivy Cooper at 1 Saxon Terrace whose schoolmaster husband, Bob, I remember from his Village cricketing days. The George was always a favourite stop, as was the Castle Inn at Bodiam.

When I retired and bought a motorhome Sussex was, and still is, one of our destinations. Initially, our daughter came with us. Whilst she remembered visiting the George with us and her brother, her favourite in our early motor homing stays at the Normanhurst Campsite at Catsfield was The Seven Stars. She was quite upset recently to hear that it was closed! She is now 38 so remembering back over 25 years. As grandchildren appeared the eldest (girls) have both enjoyed the Sussex seaside and countryside. Visits to Robertsbridge were mandatory and they too seemed to enjoy visiting their 'roots'. Regarding Normanhurst Court my mother Edith together with Nora and other girls from Robertsbridge Guide Troop used to camp by the lakes on the estate in the early 1930's.

When Nell Turner's granddaughter, my second cousin, came over from Canada to see us in 2014 we stayed at Battle when, among other places, we took her to meet Ivy Cooper, her Gran's neighbour and friend, at a Robertsbridge URC coffee morning, Ivy knew her mother Gwyneth (who had emigrated to Canada after the war having married a Canadian Serviceman stationed in the UK) and could reminisce about her childhood in Norman Villas. She found it quite moving to be in Robertsbridge, a place her mother had spoken of lovingly many times but not revisited and particularly when current residents of Norman Villas allowed her to be photographed outside her mother's old home.

On one visit, just a few years ago my wife Lesley, unbeknown to me, arranged for us to have a tour of the Gray Nichols factory now in Station Road during our next Sussex trip. Whilst the whole visit was fascinating and enjoyable the best was when I spoke to one of elderly workers creating bespoke bats just as my grandfather had done. Chatting to him about my connection to Robertsbridge etc. he said " Oh, I knew Perce (my grandfather Percy Butcher), I was his apprentice. I had to help him out of his wet clothes after he had motor cycled up Brightling Road as he was often too cold to do it himself!" This sort of brought the past 'to life'.

Brian Thompson
November 2020