

# Memories (or some of them and the way I remember it)

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Born in 1941 I was a great deal more fortunate than most being the Son of a village shopkeeper. The shop was a general store in the small village of Farnham (Suffolk) comprising some 30 households mainly comprising of “two up two down” terraced cottages. Farnham is located on the A12, 17 miles or so East of Ipswich and 3 miles South West of Saxmundham. Its whole site was roughly a triangle in shape being surrounded by roads on all three sides. The adjacent village of Stratford St Andrew similarly comprised about 30 households but with no shops, just a small garage with a couple of petrol pumps. Both villages separated by a humped back bridge over the river Alde, had their own churches and vicarages and a few larger properties for the more fortunate “upper classes”. The George and Dragon (the future subject of a whole different set of stories) in Farnham the only pub was shared between both villages and was fortuitously right next to our shop. An interesting story about the humped back brick-built bridge which in the early 1940’s was falling to pieces. Buses had to empty their passengers who had then to walk over the bridge before getting back on. Most of the buses towed something that looked like a boiler, but it was for generating gas fuel for the bus. It probably had a name which I cannot remember.

My Dad had been a structural engineer working in East London and through ill health, had to get out of “the smoke”. My Mum had been a librarian in West Ham but what made them move to rural Suffolk in the late 1930’s and manage a village and stay until 1970’s I can only guess. They employed a live-in shop assistant Doris, who got fully involved in every aspect of family life. At the time 1941-3, my two elder sisters had been evacuated to Wales and had the great fortune to be homed in a Bishops Palace.

It’s a sad thought but probably most if not all the Mums and Dads I remember from my childhood together with several of my contemporaries now reside in St Mary’s churchyard. I think it likely that the only person who may still live there that I remember is Timmy Plant at Turret House and maybe his sister. Not at all certain if post 1940’s Farnham has been recorded elsewhere but I can’t find much after extensive internet searches!!

Some of my very earliest memories were of watching skies full of convoluted vapour trails from dogfights between the opposing forces and sometime later of watching American flying fortresses from the nearest airfields at Parham and Bentwaters, assembling in formation before flying off to some bombing target in Europe. Even later in the day I remember watching those who had survived come straggling home.

It is hard to clearly remember just how tough it must have been in the early forties for the majority of families with everything on ration even if it was available. Us country dwellers had it a bit easier than the townies. There was always the odd rabbit or two and fresh eggs supplemented by reasonable supplies of fresh vegetables grown in back gardens or on allotments. Very occasionally we were fortunate to “acquire” a pheasant or two or hare. Bartering was a common occurrence in those tough days. (Frequently at the pub on a Friday or Saturday night in exchange for beer!) The

allotment field in Farnham was opposite what was then the local Elm tree farm, the source of village milk, and the one at Stratford opposite the now defunct St Andrews church.

For the first few years of my life I was not aware of just how much of an impact that running the village shop had not only my family but for everybody else in a rural village and elsewhere. Even in those early years I was aware of the fact there was a large increase in the local population. Two large American airbases at Parham and Bentwaters, a camp for German prisoners, another camp for Polish refugees and an influx of land army girls working on the local farms. In addition to this there were large number of soldiers temporarily accommodated both in Farnham and Stratford. There were constant tank movements and military vehicles. Missing chunks off the corners of the shop are testament to the tank driver's "skill". The only obvious and direct effect on the village of the war was a crashed bomber in the middle of the field just beyond the church but cannot recall if it was English, American or German (the latter I think). Fortunately, neither village suffered any serious bombing, just the odd solitary or phosphor incendiary.

The hardest time for us all was during the winter months when not only was it cold and dark at 6.00pm outside but similar inside with house windows blacked out. A severe reprimand from the ARP was the result if any lights showed in the roads outside. Fortunately, both Mum and Dad played the piano and the radio had always got something on. The gap between radio programmes was filled with the sound of Bow Bells, shame it changed. We spent many a night singing "ten green bottles", "coming round the mountain", "one man went to mow" and several other catchy little numbers of that period.

Most families in the village had an allotment which was always a source of great rivalry as to who had grown the biggest, the longest or the most. Typical of the Suffolk humour recalled from my past, "George, there bloody little ole taters yoo digging." "Ahh" says Jim, "thay for my gob not yourn!!" Every family had a few chickens, ducks or geese and a fortunate few might have pig or a goat "down the garden" to be served as Sunday roasts at some future dates. Our allotment was 20 rods long (1 rod is about 5 yards) and if well managed, could easily support the family, any surplus sometimes found its way to the shop. If I remember rightly the rent was a halt a crown a year in old money, about twelve pence in today's money. Fruit and vegetables were only consumed within their respective home-grown seasons. Oranges like most "foreign" fruit was rare and bananas non-existent.

Nobody in the village had mains water, it was all wells and hand pumps. Occasionally individual houses had their own, but most were from communal pumps serving several households. Very few had electricity and relied on paraffin, open fires and/or coal fired cooking ranges for heating and cooking. Lighting was mainly paraffin lamps or Tilly lamps since only a few had electricity. Virtually nobody had a car apart from my Dad who was limited as to what he could do by way of deliveries since petrol was on extremely strict ration. Public bus transport was very scarce, maybe 2 or 3 a day. There were no Taxi services and the only telephone other than the one in the shop was a phone box on the pub carpark. (To give you some idea of how few phones there were the shop phone was Saxmundham 125). Daily news of the war progress and everything else newsworthy was per the high-tension battery and the accumulator battery both of which powered the radio. The latter involved a trip to the local garage in Stratford to be recharged at regular intervals. (Television had not yet been invented!!) The nearest air raid warning siren was at Saxmundham which could not always be heard dependant on the wind direction, being some 3 miles away!!

With the exception of bread, daily papers, clothing, meat and coal, everything else was available from the village shop “against coupons from the ration book”, general groceries fresh vegetables and fruit, sweets and confectionary, tobacco, some hardware, paint and distemper, medical supplies such as Aspirins, Carters little liver pills done up in a twist of paper, kaolin poultice and Elastoplast, china and glass, haberdashery, snares and mole traps, chicken food, paraffin and methylated spirit and a whole host of other general things to keep the village running. Interesting to note the shop did not have fridges or freezers or hand washing facilities up until mid-1950’s and meat, mainly bacon, was kept in perforated-zinc safe. Come to think of it the house similarly had no fridge or freezer. Our shop eventually inherited the local Post Office from an “ancient” Mrs Birt, and now had to deal with letters, parcels some of which were wax sealed, savings, postal orders and pension pay outs. Most villagers had a book for things bought “on tick” and paid off in part or in full on pay day or pension day. (It’s hard to realise that food rationing only ended in 1954!) As well as being the village shopkeeper my Dad also found himself as Captain of the local Home Guard and my Mum as a general “go to” for minor injuries and ailments. However, both were very active in all village events as well as being churchgoers and bringing up three children in difficult times. There were no supermarkets and the only real competition to the village shop was from the local Co-op and the International Stores both of whom delivered just once a week from Saxmundham. (Talking of the Home Guard I remember years and years after the war, maybe the late 1970’s telling me of a tenuous link between them and Churchill’s secret army whose regional centre was Mill House in Stratford. I always intended to research the subject but never quite got round to it!! Maybe you have?)

Health and hygiene by today’s standards, were non-existent. Nobody had separate bathrooms or flushing toilets. The once a week bath for the whole family mainly on Saturday night, was in a tin bath usually kept in an outhouse or shed, moved into the kitchen for the occasion. Hot water from the “wash house” cast iron coal fired boiler and cold water from the pump, were added as the day/evening progressed. I was lucky having the first bath followed by my sisters and the rest of the family. The bath was emptied early Sunday morning. By that time the water looked more like thin cream cheese with a thick scum. I recall one particular bath day having got out of the bath as my sister was getting in, I was sitting and drying on the kitchen windowsill watching two parachutes drifting down not very far away. A little while later two American pilots/air crew turned up in the shop complete with wobbled up parachutes. It was a bit of a bonus for all the ladies and girls of the village all of whom wound up with silk khaki-coloured knickers.

Toilets were mainly in a shed “down the garden” with buckets under a wooden seat with appropriate openings for adults and children. Toilet paper was predominately sheets of old cut up newspapers hung on a peg or a nail. The buckets were emptied as regularly as necessary on the allotment which greatly benefited the produce, not so good if you used Elsanol chemical sanitiser.

For as long as I can remember every morning Doris stripped the beds at about 7.30 to get me and my sisters dressed and washed. Hand and face washed in cold water with carbolic soap summer and winter, from a big metal jug which stood on the draining board by the scullery sink. If you were lucky the “rubber scented” nearly cold water from the previous night’s hot water bottle was added, just to take the chill off the icy cold water. Frequently one or two large slugs had to be removed from the water jug before the washing process began!

If we were lucky break fast was a cup of tea, milk and corn flakes with a trace of “on ration” sugar. If we were even luckier on really cold mornings, it would be slightly warmed milk or even porridge

instead of corn flakes. Every breakfast was competed with a big spoon of malt extract. Sunday mornings were a bit special, a bit of a lie in followed by bacon and egg fry up.

The shop opened at 8.30am and closed at 6.00pm six days a week, half day early closing on Thursdays and all-day Sunday, fifty-two week a year excluding bank holidays. All three of us, my two elder sisters and me were sent off on the school bus to the local primary school at Benhall at about 8.45am, just about a couple of miles away. To my knowledge it was and still is the only thatched school for miles around.

Life revolved 24/7 about the shop and left little time for anything else, there was always something to be done, cleaning, dusting, sweeping and filling up the fixtures and making up orders to be delivered the next day. Dad ran a delivery service in his old crank up start Austin Ten to every adjacent village, Little Glemham, Great Glemham, Stratford, Benhall, Sternfield, Blaxhall and Snape. As long as the car started, deliveries of groceries with a boot full of two-gallon cans of paraffin were made most days of the week irrespective of the weather.

It seems strange to recall just how many provisions turned up as bulk boxes or sacks, butter, lard, cheese, rice, sugar, currents, raisins and sultanas to mention a few. All had to be weighed and packed in bags or greaseproof paper before sale. Bacon arrived as whole unboned half pigs which in turn had to be boned, jointed, and sliced on the hand driven bacon machine. Cheese arrived as 60 pound round lumps which had to be skinned from their muslin wrapping, a really difficult and time consuming job up until the arrival of the alternative muslin wax coating cheeses. The rations during the war period and for quite a long time after were minimal. Weighing up two ounces of butter and cheese for the weekly ration seems almost unbelievable.

Life for me only really started to get interesting from about the age of six (1946) when my horizons opened up with school and a social life, several low key children's birthday parties and the occasional outings to Saxmundham, Aldeburgh, Woodbridge or Ipswich. Holidays for most families were non existent largely on account of the limited finances the majority surviving on one meagre income from either farming or the local engineering works of HH Heffer. (The latter is the subject of several books and newspaper articles.) The highlight for most was a day at the Suffolk Show which in those days was held at a variety of locations such a Benacre Park near Wrentham. Heffer's 20ton lorry would be decked out with straw bales, everybody climbed on board and off they would go for the day. A visit to a pub on the way home was not unheard of!

Wednesdays was the weekly local livestock market at Saxmundham, another distraction from the general humdrum way of life. Whilst I was lucky to get a family Sunday outings to Orford or Aldeburgh if the petrol allowance permitted, most were limited to how far they chose to cycle, life was otherwise very routine with long working hours for most. For the most part entertainment was the local pub, the men's club and quoits. The women had to make do with the WI and Mothers Union and lots of over the fence gossip. The kids had nothing much other than kicking a ball round the streets and frequent wanderings round the local marshes and footpaths and generally getting into mischief. One of the favourite walks was up the "stumps", across the field to Molletts Farm and back to the village via the A12. However, we were always made welcome wherever we wound up.

There were exceptions to the humdrum way of life with village fetes, the vicar's garden parties as well as special occasions such as VE day and VJ day. There was occasionally a social evening held in the village hut up "the stumps". Singing, dancing, recitals of home spun poetry and yarns plus games

where our local Farnham and Stratford got talent show was fun for all. They were always well attended by families from both villages and were never short of a wide variety refreshments. The mobile fish and chip shop created a bit of a diversion on Tuesdays and Thursdays parked on the George and Dragon car park and similarly the mobile "cinema" about once a month. We were spoilt for choice for cinemas at Aldeburgh, Leiston, Saxmundham and Framlingham. The last two have been banished to history for many years but the former two are still going.

On warm and fine sunny evenings the sound of clang on clang as the local quoit team were either practicing or involved in a match several times a week. Most of the local villages had quoits teams and a Farnham player won player of the season in the county finals on several occasions. Invariably the evening finished up in the George and Dragon.

The two local churches were never well supported except for harvest festival and Christmas. Heating for what it was worth, was a very smoky tortoise stove and music provided by a well-worn out harmonium. (I remember an odd occasion or two when after service and the congregation had left, Dad would have a session of playing Twelfth Street Rag and other ragtime's.) Farnham had two bells and Stratford had three. It was a delight to me that early on very cold and frosty winter mornings to occasionally hear a full peal of bells from Blaxhall church drifting across the marshes. There was always Sunday school which was very well attended. I well remember collecting the attendance stamps.

As a chorister from about the age of twelve together with another lad of the same age plus several girls all of whom were dressed in cassock, surplus and ruff, performed twice every Sunday to a very minimal congregation of about a dozen souls other than as previously mentioned on the well-attended harvest festival and Christmas. Choir practice was about an hour on a Thursday night all year round. Many a tale could be told about the choir and are probably best not told!!

Tales from the George and Dragon and on/in the river Alde are legion and perhaps the subject of another chapter or two.