

MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS



Stan Robshaw





CHILDHOOD

My father, John Joseph Robshaw, grew up in Edmonton, North London, with a brother and two sisters. He served in the Royal Horse Artillery during the First World War, before joining the Metropolitan police force in 1921. A well-built man, he was often on ceremonial duties. He was respected and popular in the community and people would often come to him for a reference.

Ethel Primrose Hastings had lived her entire life in Tottenham. It was here that she met and began married life with my father in a nice three bedroom terraced house on Alexandra Road. I was born on 13th June 1926, two years after my brother Les and three years before Don.



I have extremely fond memories of my early childhood. Our house was number twenty four, the end of a terraced row. The properties were all rentals and each week the landlord would come round to collect the rents and check if anything needed doing. Outside the front of the terrace there were iron railings and at the end of the road there was a pub. Our house had open fires for heating and in the kitchen there was a cast iron oven with fire beside it and back boiler and flue. Mum had a fender along the front with seat boxes at each end to sit on and keep warm.

Mum was lovely - very homely and attentive to all our needs. Dad worked eight hour shifts, from either two o'clock in the afternoon, ten o'clock in the evening or six o'clock in the morning. This upset his digestive system and of course when he was on nights we had to be very quiet. Mum did all the chores around the house. The weekdays had a pattern to them, a real routine. Wash day was always on Monday, as it was for everyone in those days; you could see lines full of clothes everywhere. It was also Bubble and Squeak day for tea! We were always up early and rarely went to bed after ten to ten thirty p.m. There was no television, instead we used to listen to Children's Hour on our battery set radio. My brother had a crystal set.



I played in the local parks, mostly football, but I also enjoyed roller skating or riding my push bike. In those days, all roads were safe with hardly any cars and you could skate anywhere. My friends were mainly local to home and I can still remember all their names. We were all sport minded. As I grew older, I didn't have so much to do with Les, who was quite the studious type.

My early school days in infants and junior were at a nearby school called St Anne's. I passed the 'Eleven Plus' and then went to Tottenham Grammar School, about two to three miles away from home. I would get there by train, from Seven Sisters to Whitehart Lane. I didn't mind school, it

was well organised and the teachers well trained. They were all very helpful and respected. In grammar school they still wore their gowns and mortars. They were more strict there, especially our French teacher. Everyone was afraid of him because he carried a book around with him and if you didn't know an answer, he bopped you over head with it!

We really were a very happy family. I felt secure in every way and life was straightforward. Even prices stayed static, not like now. If a dozen eggs cost nine pence - five years later it would still be nine pence. One shilling for four lots of fish and chips, three pence each.

I knew everyone down my side of the road. There was Lou Garlick at the end, a rough diamond with a heart of gold. She was always there for anyone in trouble. Next to her were the Kreetzers - he was a plumber by trade and his young boys Jack and Alan were my friends - followed by 'Big' Mrs Reed who lived on her own, so named due to her very 'powerful build'. Next was Ethel Short and her husband. There was a genuine community spirit, as there was no government social welfare system in existence yet. Despite this, if you went to hospital you never had a problem getting seen to quickly. Most nurses were Irish then, nursing was a way of life for them and often they were not married. Each ward was run by a Matron, who was like a Sergeant Major commanding discipline amongst the staff, including doctors. As a result, hygiene was first class.

If you needed to see a doctor you paid a shilling or half crown. Our local doctor would come by on his push bike, wearing a bowler hat and carrying his bag. Dr Shawsmith was his name, he was also a surgeon at the local hospital and a wonderful man. He had all the time in the world for children, but he soon saw through 'lead swingers' and sent them packing. I wasn't aware of any real poverty, but of course in the East End of London there were the rougher quarters, mostly council estates.

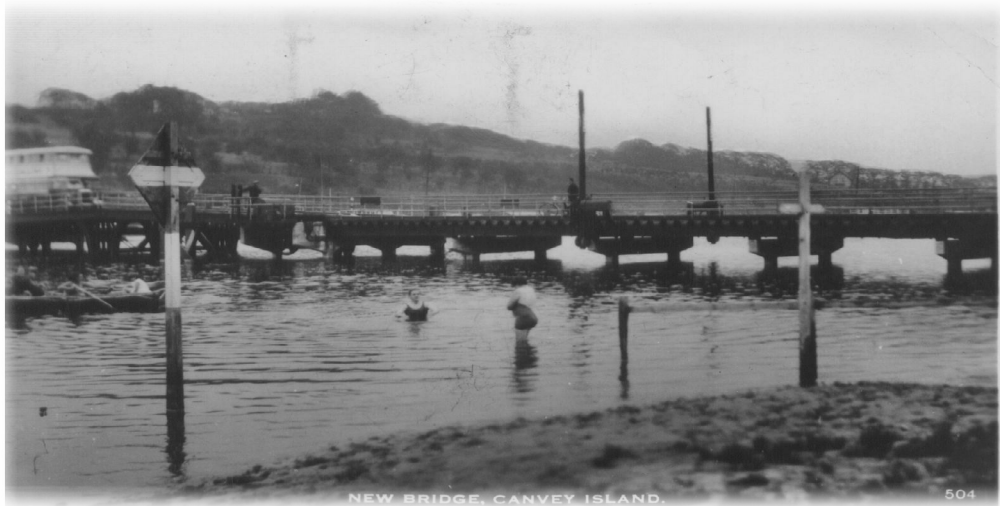
We would regularly visit dad's mother in Edmonton. She lived there with a lodger called Bill Saunders - a big character who liked his beer. I can remember he would take his jug to the off license near their cottage to be filled up - they were called 'jug and bottle' places - then come outside quickly to gulp down the entire contents and rush back inside for another! Grandmother was a little old lady, an excellent cook, she often made rabbit pies. She died while I was away in India, I think she was in her eighties. I never knew my maternal grandparents, as both had died before I was born.



We also went on fairly regular holidays, sometimes to Littlehampton in Sussex, but mostly to Canvey Island, in those days a lovely spot. There were houseboats on the creeks. These really were lovely family holidays, travelling by train and bus, although the accommodation was very basic. To give you an idea, one place we stayed in was called 'Snug Within' in Benfleet, where there were no

roads, only cart tracks. It was a round corrugated iron building with an iron roof thrown on top and when dawn broke in the morning you could hear the birds dancing on the roof. As for the

toilet facilities, the man of house had to dig a hole in the ground, put a toilet contraption over it and then lightly build a shed around it. Every so often you had to dig a new hole and move it, which we called 'burying the dead'. Despite this, it was peaceful and idyllic, there were even wild horses about. I can recall going over the creek to get to Canvey, the bridge would lift to let boats through and then come back down to let the bus over. Canvey Island is now built up and horrible, nothing at all like it was then.



I was a good boy, I never gave my parents any trouble. Practical by nature, I loved working with my hands. I had Meccano sets that I could actually operate by attaching them to an engine I had. It ran on metholated spirits. So if, for example, I made a windmill I could connect it and get it working. I was given a carpentry set when I was twelve and to this day I have still got the mini plane and fret saw in my toolbox. I really liked woodwork and seemed to be good at it, so I taught myself how make things and did so all my life. I made mum a sideboard for her house and years later, I made a complete sideboard unit for my own home, in knotted pine tongue and groove. I even fret cut hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades in its four doors. I was very proud of it. I always loved sport and being outdoors. I wasn't particularly interested in girls, but I did have a few passing crushes, in particular on a girl called Iris Brockett. Her father was a train driver. I was sixteen and she was very pretty –she knew it, she was quite flirtatious!



THE WAR YEARS



The happy security of those early years unfortunately did not last. Without a doubt, the most traumatic and life-changing years were those following the Declaration of War with Germany. I was thirteen. From leading a normal, happy and secure schoolboy life with my parents and brothers and friends, I was suddenly thrown into a total state of uncertainty. These crucial years very quickly took me from boyhood to manhood.

Plans to evacuate thousands of school children from London to safe havens in the countryside were immediately put into place. The day eventually came when it was my turn, together with my younger brother Don, to join this mass exodus. We gathered at our local school, wearing an identity badge on our jacket and clutching a suitcase full of clothing, our gas mask in a cardboard box strapped over our shoulders. We were all heading into the unknown, so it was with a mixture of tears and squealing excitement that we said goodbye to our parents and boarded coaches to the nearest railway station. The train took us to a dispersal point and we were met by volunteers, who took us to the foster families who had agreed to look after us for the duration.

Our village was called Farcet about four miles from Peterborough and the A1. By the time we arrived, we were worn out, hungry and brain dead after a most traumatic day. Come dawn of our first day there, I felt totally isolated and bewildered in a strange new world full of people I had never known before. However, as children do, I quickly responded to the lovely, welcoming and sympathetic family I was billeted with and gradually adapted to life in small country village.



1 Broadway, Farcet,
taken when I re-visited
in 2013.

Mr and Mrs Ward were a nice couple with a seventeen year old son called Cecil, a likeable fella doing an apprenticeship at JP Halls in Peterborough. Mr Ward was a flight Sergeant in the RAF and stationed at Cranwell airbase as an instructor. Don was nearby with another couple. Looking back, I realise how incredibly resilient we were as children - we didn't stay anxious for long, we just got on with it! Back then, I can honestly say my experience of people was good, with everyone I met going out of their way to be kind and protective.

I realised very early on that it was now my responsibility to make any day to day decisions for myself and my younger brother Don, who was only ten. I could no longer seek advice or guidance from my parents or elder brother. There were no phone lines to enable us to communicate easily, although they did write and occasionally visit.

For several months, as I was older than most of the evacuees, I helped the teachers in the local village schools who were struggling to cope with the overload of younger pupils, while they tried to find a place for me in a secondary school in Peterborough. Three days each week, I cycled into Farcet Fen to help on a farm owned by Mr Ward's father. I spent days there on my own, totally surrounded by open countryside and in all weathers, collecting chicken eggs, cutting down reeds in dykes, muck spreading, potato picking behind the ploughman and sugar beet chopping. All backbreaking work, but my first ever paid work which I found very satisfying. When I eventually started at Fletton Bridge School, I quickly realised I was being taught things I had already learned in London. All round Farcet were lots of brick yards, quarries and kilns. Fletton Bricks was well-known and still is today.

It was 1941 and I was now aged fifteen. Our parents were missing us and there seemed to be no letup in the nightly bombings of London, so it was arranged for us both to return home and chance our luck. I decided there was not much future in staying in Farcet anyway with the war going on, as I did not want any more schooling. It was time to do some real work. So I took Don back home with me and started at the local furniture firm Harris Lebus, where Les was already busy working. Of course, it had turned over to war production only, as was everything else that could be. Even the iron railings outside our house had been taken and melted down for armaments. For twenty four hours every day the factory was busy making mosquito fighter bombers, troop carrying gliders, two man cockle canoes, Jettison petrol tanks and landing assault craft. Each day was a hectic, dangerous day. In 1942 the Germans started using an additional danger to Londoner's lives - the Doodlebug. You could see and hear these Doodlebugs coming over with their flame tail. It was really frightening as you knew directly the flame stopped, it would drop straight down and hit whatever was below with devastating consequences. The V2 rockets were more direct, you didn't hear those, they just came and BOOM! Devastation everywhere, for miles and miles along docks on the Thames, when the daily night raids were at their worst.

Ironically, the blitz was to reach its peak soon after our return, putting us into real danger. Everyone had an Anderson's and/or Morrison's air raid shelter. These shelters were regular sleeping places for months on end from 1941 to 1943. Anderson's you put up in your own garden. They were made of an arched sheet of corrugated iron, with another on each side and a door at one end. The father of the household would dig a big hole about eight foot by six foot to sink half of the shelter below ground level. You then had to dig a sump in the corner as every day it would fill up with water, put duck boards to walk on and wooden bunks to sleep on. Each and every night, when the sirens went off, we would go down in there or into a Morrison's shelter. This was designed for indoor use and was about twice the size of the oak table I have now. People used to sleep under that, the theory being if house fell down you would be protected underneath. Many people were killed every night.

Each night the street watch team would be out looking out for incendiary bombs that would set the place alight. Two hour shifts were organised by street. Any man or young man had to do it and take it in turns throughout the night from ten in the evening until six in the morning. If you did ten until midnight, you would be on again from four until six in the morning. Two hours on, four

hours off, a couple of turns a week. I can still vividly remember seeing the search lights above picking out aircraft in the sky and the flashes of our guns firing at them. Shrapnel from our guns would be falling everywhere which is why you had to wear a tin hat, you could hear tiny bits of shrapnel 'pinging' around as it hit things. Schools started up again and Don went back to school.

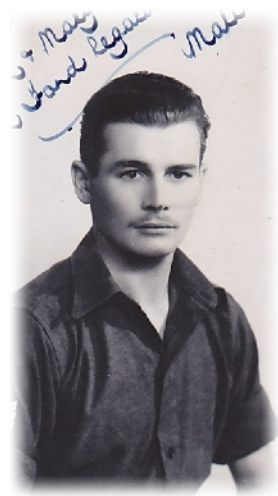


Three years later, I was doing quite well at Lebus, until I turned eighteen and received my dreaded call up letter. I said goodbye to my family and reported to the army barracks in Colchester. I walked through its big iron gate entrance and that was it - once again, I found myself all alone amongst a crowd of strangers. It was another rude awakening. There were twelve to twenty of us in a barrack room on bunks. Each morning at six o'clock prompt we were out square marching and learning war tactics. I was forced to mix with chaps from all sorts of backgrounds I had never met in my life. Some were real rogues and you soon learned you had to defend yourself. If someone nicked your towel, you would have to nick someone else's, because if you didn't, you would have to pay for it and get into trouble. Fortunately, rogues didn't stay rogues for long. They would soon be sent out running with full packs on their back around the square – the aim being to break their spirit. All this taught me discipline and it has never left me. Yes, you very quickly learned!

After a quick initiation in Colchester, I was posted to Catterick in Yorkshire to do my wireless operator training. First thing in the morning we had physical training (PT) whatever the weather. Training lasted about six months, including manoeuvres on the Yorkshire Moors. I can remember getting into trouble and being disciplined there. The moors were deep in snow and we were travelling with our wireless and gear in the back of our truck. There were only three of us, two wireless operators and a driver, in weather so bad there was no wireless contact. There were snow drifts everywhere, so we drove into a farm yard to shelter for the night and to try to get communication back. We each took two hour shifts to work the wireless. Unfortunately, the driver fell asleep during his shift and the Commanding Officer turned up. He was able to take all our gear, rifles, code signs. The next day back at camp we were all on a charge. We had to do seven days 'Jankers' which meant extra duties and being confined to camp. Being caught napping was serious misconduct, particularly leaving our rifles, wireless and secret call signs and location codes unguarded!

Before I went abroad there were some other small postings, including one on Downpatrick race course. I was part of a small signal unit of a handful of men. We played horseshoes there and took bets on races. That was probably where my interest in betting really got going. There were so many memorable experiences. I played football in the mountains of Mourne. I also went to Morpeth in Northumberland where, at first, they had us digging holes and filling them up again, just to keep us occupied! Our head unit was in Crawley, Sussex and our regimental Sergeant Major Irvine was a tough, but very fair man.

I had by now met my future wife Margaret while stationed at Lytham St Anne's near Blackpool. We were both eighteen. I really can't remember where I first met her precisely, our paths just crossed being in the same army unit. She used to help in the cook house in early days and we probably got into conversation. She liked the open life, the countryside and seaside. So while we were there, we would go out for walks in our free time. We were free to be out on our own, walking along beach or out in countryside. We often sat in the park, just the two of us, where we could talk - plus other things, of course! I quickly fell for her as we had same likes and dislikes, it was an instant hit off and there were no complications of other boyfriends or girlfriends. The spark was there and we agreed that whatever happened we would



keep in contact. Similarly, I always kept in contact with a friend I had made during my initial training, Malcolm Roberts, who eventually was to be our best man. I was sent to India, Margaret was sent to Germany and Malcolm to Egypt.



I had to go to Huddersfield for briefing before being transported to Southampton. Here I boarded and was out at sea for three weeks, crossing the Mediterranean and Suez Canal. We were all cramped together on ship, so much so that if you rolled out your hammock, you fell into someone else's! The mess decks held about twelve to fifteen men on sides of these tables and there were many of them. However, when we went through Bay of Biscay, only six turned up for meals due to sea sickness. Overall, the food was acceptable, we didn't pay much attention to it. We did exercises and refreshment courses during the trip, but otherwise we were not occupied very much.



I eventually arrived in Karachi, relieved to be on land again. From there we were sent to a transit camp and then into a jungle clearing nearby. This photo here shows me having a shave at the camp. We would go on all night marches of twenty to thirty miles, carrying hurricane lamps. I can remember once some stragglers got lost thinking they were following the lamps - it turned out to be those of an Indian with his ox cart! It was in the jungle that I got a snake bite on my chest. I noticed the bite after it had actually happened – it must have

been during the night when I was asleep in bed. My bed was simply a wooden frame with sisal string and a mosquito net. The bite swelled up, so I needed to find a Medical Officer (MO).

In fact, the biggest danger to us for most of my time in India was always the environment rather than the war itself - we were susceptible to ringworm, prickly heat, dermatitis, scorpion and snake bites.

I caught a form of dermatitis on my face when travelling by train to Lahore. It was a very long journey and steam would pour into the cabins as there were no windows, so I think this was what caused it. My skin had to be treated by painting on a blue liquid. I had no idea what this liquid was, but it meant that every time we made a stop I had to dash to the nearest M.O. to get some painted on and then dash back. Indians were all over the exterior of the train, either hanging off the sides or sitting on the top. There were no upholstered seats, just slats, so it was uncomfortable and, above all, hot. They would throw blocks of ice onto the train to try to cool us down, but the further south we travelled, the more it became humid and we all became itchy with prickly heat. Tea was brewed on the engine and we would eat curry at the stations. No matter how careful we were, everyone inevitably ended up with a stomach upset of some kind. It was a shame the amazing scenery was spoiled by so much discomfort.

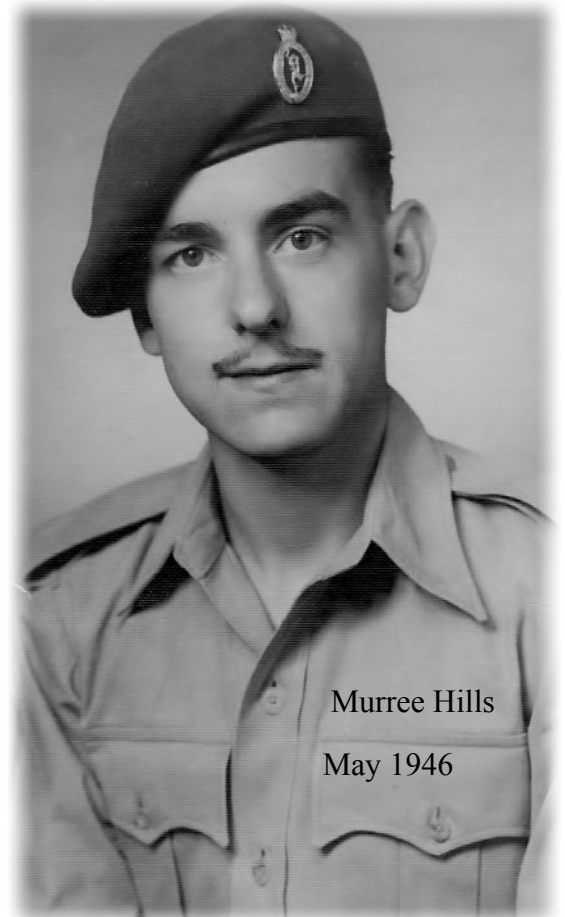
The signal office headquarters were in Malir near Karachi. I looked after Indian despatch riders there, showing them their routes while riding pillion on the back of their scooters. Hair-raising! My commanding officer was Colonel Pringle and rumour had it that the commanding officer of the division was Lieutenant General Frederick Browning (whose wife was Daphne du Maurier)



My army division, the 2nd airborne division, was two thirds Indian and one third British. Our favourite pastime was to play football and I was team captain, even though I was the only white man playing. We played against some Gurkhas who didn't even wear boots. None of us mixed much with locals, we just had the Dobhi Wallahs who did valeting for us. One of them invited us to his wedding and we all ended up paying for it, he was a crafty character!

Once, when I was on a six week leave in the Murree Hills, we went horse riding. There were sheer mountain cliffs on either side of our track, it was really, really frightening. I learned to play bridge there and became quite good at it. We played Colonel Beesley's system - years later I was to join the Essex bridge club at Lebus.

One time, while on leave at home, I spent my last evening out in a pub in Southampton for drinks and a game of darts. When I was ready to depart, I couldn't find my battle dress jacket- someone had stolen it. Unfortunately, it had my service history book in the breast pocket which included details of my inoculations and vaccinations, such as yellow fever and tetanus. The following morning, I lined up on the quay side ready to board my ship, feeling very embarrassed as I stood out like a sore thumb out of uniform. I was allowed to board and once in Bombay changed into my KD tropical gear. The Rail Transport Officer (R.T.O.) looked at my papers and told me which train to get on, as I had to relocate my unit again which could still be moving. Eventually, I caught up with the unit in some remote spot, probably on the outskirts of Karachi. I couldn't draw any money without my pay



book. My officer then was second lieutenant George Wright from Ilford in Essex and I had been to call on his parents while on leave. I explained how I had lost my battle dress and he told me he could sort things out, but could not falsify my inoculation records. I therefore had to see the M.O. and have them again, all in one go. I spent some time in the transit camp Deolali, which was a large tented area in middle of nowhere. There was nothing else there and it sent you mad with boredom if you stayed too long, which gave rise to the well known expression 'gone Doolally'.

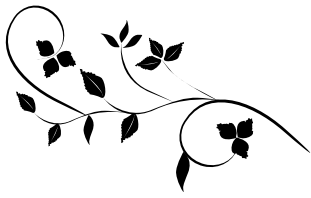
Parachute training was in Chakala, Northern India. Six day time jumps and one night jump. This gave you your parachutist wings and for this you got an extra shilling a day, quite a bit of extra money. The second day time and the night jump were the most frightening of them. It was particularly difficult to judge distance in the dark.



I was expecting to have to parachute in on either Singapore or Burma, but the atomic bomb stopped that from happening. The Americans dropped them on Nagasaki and Hiroshima with devastating consequences, thus ending the war.

It still took some time before I was able to leave India. Britain handed over home rule back to the natives and, by this time, there were not many of us left there. We were sent up to Quetta, on the border of Afghanistan. Our camp was stationed up on the mountain side, looking down onto the town. We could see the smoke of fires where the Hindus and Muslims were fighting it out for shops and buildings. Fortunately, we didn't get involved at all – a battalion of Gurkhas were sent to sort that out and they were as tough as they come. Overall, the partition of India was to displace twelve and a half million people with estimates to loss of life of at least several hundred thousand.

I finally left India in 1947 when our unit was disbanded on 15th August. The two self governing countries of India and Pakistan had legally come into existence.



MARRIED LIFE

As I have mentioned before, Margaret was posted to Germany and Malcolm to Africa. We all returned home at the end of 1947. I quickly contacted Margaret who was with her parents in Grimsby and went to spend some time with her. She also visited my family. Her parents were not particularly welcoming to me. Her father was easy going enough, but her mother never made life very easy for us. She was quite possessive and afraid of losing her daughter. Nevertheless, I soon proposed and we arranged to get married in Grimsby in the Church of Good Shepherd on March 27th 1948.



We lived with my parents for short time until my mothers sister Aunt Edie died and we moved into the ground floor of her house.

Aunt Edie's two sons were Eric and John and she had a daughter Ethel, who was a lovely girl. She married a very handsome man named Billy Griffiths, a senior pilot of Imperial Airways. I had arranged to meet him during the war in an officer club in Karachi, as he flew out there regularly. Imperial Airways eventually became BOAC. John was a very clever man, a scientific boffin who eventually got a very important job - he would be sent to investigate any big disasters in the country. He was Don's age and so could still be alive today. During the war, cousin Eric had been sent to Burma, where he was taken prisoner and forced to work on the railway. When he was released, he weighed only four stone and was taken on the Queen Elizabeth to America to be 'fatted up' and made presentable before coming back to the UK. He told me some terrible stories. One prison officer held a cricket stump in his hand and, if a prisoner annoyed him, would hit them over the head with it. In the end, people would just bow before him whenever he passed by to get less of a blow. Despite all this, Eric came back the same lively character he had been before the war, but his health was never same again and he didn't live long. I realised how lucky I had been.

We lived on Alexandra Road for four to five years. We wanted children - boys or girls, we didn't mind. On my side of family it was all boys and on Margaret's side all girls, so it was going to be luck of the draw. Our first son, Anthony, was born the following year. We had a very happy time with the baby. I was working at the local furniture manufacturer, Harris Lebus. Margaret was content to stay at home and be housewife and mother, as did most women those days. We would go to the cinema and theatre for entertainment. We were lucky to have my mother close by to baby sit for us. We always managed to get away for a holiday, often with Margaret's sister Doreen.

Life was once again simple. My younger brother Don who had gone into the clothing producing world wanted some work done and so I helped him out to get some extra money. We set up little workshop in my friend and colleague Ernie Worman's house in Bush Hill Park, Enfield - a beautiful Dutch Tudor style house, number seventy two on Melbourne Way. I eventually bought this house so that Tony and Chris could go to the local school here. It cost me £2,250, I was earning five pounds a week and was able to get a mortgage with a 4.5% interest rate. Christopher was born three years later in 1952. We lived there for thirteen years. Very happy times. We would go for long walks in the countryside or cycled when the kids were old enough. We had good neighbours and friends, we often socialised with them. Margaret was always happy to be at home raising the children. I was happy in my job. In 1960 Nick was born and although unplanned, was another welcome addition to our family.



We next moved to 6, The Chimes, in Benfleet, Essex. This was a lovely four bed detached brand new build house. It was 1968 and Tony and Chris were now teenagers - both fairly independent personalities doing their own thing. Tony, in particular, could always look after himself, as he still does. Our holidays were spent at Dymchurch in Kent, we went there for several years running, taking our bikes. We all enjoyed the open life.

Margaret's mother continued to be a bit difficult. She did some funny things out of spite – for example, she would secretly fiddle about with the TV or radio set and take out plugs so that we would wonder why it wasn't working any more. Why? I think it was attention seeking. It may have stemmed from her difficult gypsy background.

Margaret told me that whenever the gypsies came to town and wherever they set up home, her mother would disappear to go to spend time with them. Unfortunately, she never revealed much to Margaret about her past. She had come from a big family - her brother George had dark curly hair and wore a kerchief around his neck, her sister was called Rose and her step brother Harry. There were many relatives and she kept in contact with them all. They had originally come from Wales, then moved around a lot until they settled in Grimsby. When one of them moved, the whole tribe moved!



Margaret's mother was tough and street wise. To give you an idea, when she worked down on fish docks in Grimsby, if they wanted to try to get more money out of employers, she would always be the spokeswoman, the shop steward. She was quite a firebrand really and the dominant one in her marriage. Her family was a bit mixed up, whereas his were straightforward living people. I often wondered why he married her. Clearly opposites

attract and I think he grounded her. He was a down to earth working man, with never a bad word to say about anyone. Big, tall and easy-going. She, on the other hand, was small and tough. She could be really aggressive towards him, she could be rough.

Margaret had consequently had quite a tough upbringing. Her mother used to try to stop her from going out in the evenings, but Margaret would climb out of the window! Margaret always had to look after her sister Doreen who was a bit of a whiner and whenever she went out with her pals she had to take Doreen with her. She told me she would get so fed up with her sometimes that, in frustration, she would tie her to a tree. Another time she threw something at her and accidentally hit her on the head. Margaret's mum chased her down road and she thought was going to kill her - she didn't dare return home until dusk. So there was always this kind of battle going on between them. Margaret was no fool and was never to be put on by anyone. Even though people knew her mum was of gypsy origins, people were not discriminating and seemed to accept her as good living woman and good mother. We got on fairly well until she died, aged sixty five.



My parents, in contrast, were always very stable and easy going. They loved Margaret, who got on particularly well with mum who used to visit us every week in Bush Hill park. She would come over by train and if we wanted to go out somewhere special she would baby sit.

Margaret was very easy going, but she had these strong principles, you could never get her to do anything she didn't want to do. She hated coffee and so whenever she was out at coffee mornings or in the school community, Margaret always insisted she would have a cup of tea, flatly refusing coffee, or any alcohol for that matter. She only ever smoked the odd cigarette, unlike me.

On a couple of occasions I was in trouble with her myself. Firstly, when we were at Woodley, I went to play cards and stayed out all night. I snuck back in at the crack of dawn, already feeling guilty. Then, when I later took on a betting shop, Margaret was not happy about it from the beginning. I had thought it would add another string to my bow and just wanted to try it out, but unfortunately

Red Rum won the Grand National twice which cost me a fortune and I had to pull out of it. So Margaret turned out to be right! Thankfully, I always knew when to stop and never let my gambling get out of hand.

Overall, Margaret was very supportive and always kept a lovely clean home. The boys saw far more of her than they did of me. She must have done a good job as they never gave us much trouble as teenagers. The only incident I can think of was when we were at the Chimes in Benfleet. Chris was giving Nick a lift on his bike on the crossbar and they got pulled up by young and overzealous policeman. The day they had to go to court, Margaret went with them. Going to court was a major thing for us, even though the offence was such a minor one - but of course there were no repercussions or fine. I can honestly say no discipline was ever required from me, they were family conscious and knew they must never let me down. Loyal, just as they are today. Three very good sons.

Margaret remained close to her sister Doreen who would always join us on our holidays. She was married with no children and so enjoyed spending time with our boys. But Doreen had a bit of a jealous streak. She could see how happy we were and, unfortunately, had a difficult time with her husband, also named Stan, who was a rough diamond from Grimsby and loved to drink. He was a train driver. She was more refined than he and, like Margaret, no fool – in fact she was better educated than Margaret. She knew she could have done better. I didn't take to him much. To our amazement he later got recommended for a medal. He had been driving a train full of tanks of a fuel called Napfer and when he looked back from his engine saw flames. He was approaching a village at the time, but took quick corrective action by shooting along at full speed to extinguish the flames and to get the train out of reach. He got mentioned in Dispatches, he did! The day Doreen died, Margaret, myself, Nick and his wife Carlene took the trouble to help Stan in Cleethorpes to organise the funeral. We always kept in touch with him afterwards - until Margaret died. When Tony informed him of Margaret's passing away, his reply was 'get me some flowers

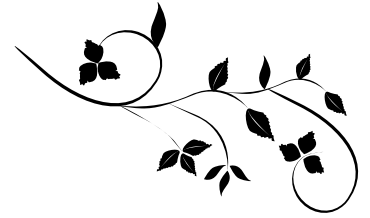
and put them there'. I told Tony, 'No you don't !' I haven't spoken to Stan since then, I felt he should have come on the train to be with us at the funeral. Anyway, it summed him up as far as I was concerned.

We watched the children grow up and change over the years. Tony with his happy-go-lucky outlook, enjoying his music and busy social life. Always kind and protective. Chris, very open minded, extremely hard working and a family man. Nick, placid and easy going, intelligent and particularly gifted with figures. Each of them with the same strong family values and work ethic that I had.

All three boys are always in touch and close, despite Chris now being far away in California. This is extremely important to me.



WORKING LIFE



I had been brought up with a strong work ethic and my brothers were equally ambitious, although we were all quite different in personality. Les went to a Polytechnic to learn a trade as an engineering draughtsman. He first went to work for the firm, Harris Lebus, that I ultimately went to. He was the most handsome of us and the ladies always chased him. He ended up married with two daughters. Don on the other hand was a 'wheeler dealer' right from a very early age. He became the first person on Alexandra Road to own a motor car - a Sunbeam - he had a good eye for business. Don started work at J.A. Prestwick's motors and studied there as a time and motion study engineer. Once qualified, he saw a job advertised with the clothing council of Great Britain. This was a consortium that anyone in the clothing trade could come to and find out how to streamline their business. He saw potential there and he and his mate Mr Fox broke away from the council with their contacts. They got a couple of good contracts including the Kettering Co-Op, who did manufacturing in those days. However, he soon realised he was doing all the hard work and his partner Fox was only doing the spending, so he decided to go it alone and they parted company. I was the practical one, easy going and adaptable. I was very motivated to go out to work and earn money. I started with only ten shillings a week, but it felt like a lot to me. I gave two thirds to mum and put some in post office savings.

Harris Lebus was the largest employer in our area, having continuously grown since its formation in the 1840's by Jewish immigrant cabinet maker, Louis Lebus. During the early part of the Second World War, I had been part of the production control team, starting as a progress chaser - my role being to chase up certain items of work. I had to have an interview to get the job, but I knew it was just a formality. When I returned after the end of the war, aged twenty one, Harris Lebus was back into furniture production. It was by now a massive outfit, the biggest furniture manufacturer in the world. We made all types of furniture, I can remember in particular a drop leaf dining table - design no 3022 - we must have sold around 300,000 of these. You simply cannot picture the scale of it in the warehouse. We carried over 40,000 pieces of furniture at any time. It was all serviced by radial conveyors. You had the factory over one side of the main road and going under the big bridge on the main road there was a lane going under it into the warehouse. Here, there were about four other radial conveyors and so each item went onto its appropriate conveyor, going full circle into the loading bays where lorries were backed up. Occasionally, a piece of furniture fell off this outlet conveyor with dramatic consequences. Unless someone was around to see it and switch it off, furniture would start to back up and pile up! We used to send thirty to forty full lorries out a day all over Britain. Some of them had an 'A' licence, which meant that on their return they could bring back other kinds of goods. We supplied a growing number of mail order Companies, including Littlewoods. Our biggest problem with this was finding people at home to accept their delivery, if not it had to come back.

People from all types of backgrounds worked there, some with highly skilled and specialised roles. There was a young fella no more than five foot six or so. He could stack one double wardrobe on top of another so easily. I went straight



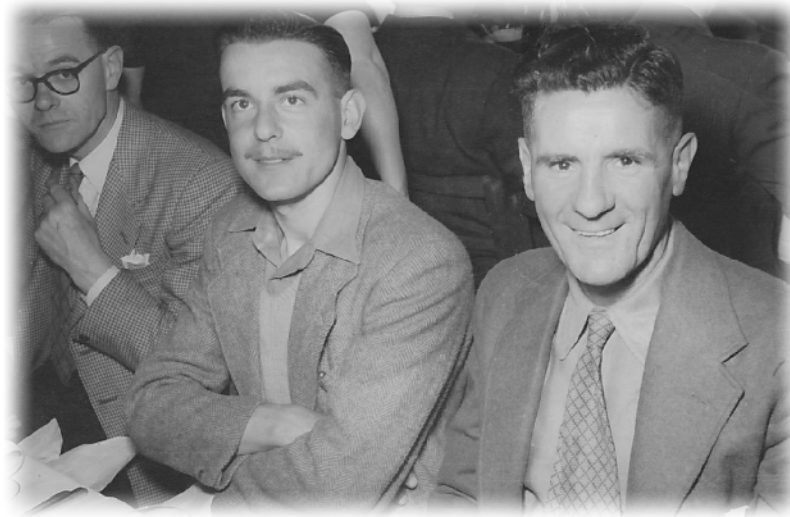
into junior supervision. The first man I worked for was Jack Thomas in the management team. He took me under his wing and could see my potential. Whatever job I did, whether I liked it or not, I did my best. I was never a clock watcher; if there was a job to finish I was always willing to do it. I often worked from eight in the morning until six, with an hour for lunch. In fact, it was normally a forty eight hour working week for everyone, which over the years have been whittled down to what it is today. I used to do overtime as well, particularly during the war effort.

I got promotions within the group and then it was decided to go computerised. For this, they brought in a man called George Robey from J Lyons Cornerhouse (Lyons of tea world). This was a highly reputable business in Regent Street and Oxford Street. George had been the prime mover in setting up their own computer systems there which they called LEO (Lyons Electronic Organisation). He was persuaded to come to our Company and set up a new audit and systems unit. This comprised of two auditors and one young man from shop floor (me) and a chap named Bob Grant from the offices. We systematically went through everything, looking at existing control and paperwork systems and all the details that went with them. Then our first task was to streamline these systems to make it easier for the computer.

During this process, we introduced some revolutionary things. Firstly, Lamson Paragon tubes or wires. Tubes went through air ducts, wires across the shop floor. This meant that rather than physically carrying information across from one area to another, the information needed would shoot across the wires or through tubing, keeping track of each item going from A to B to C. A progress card stayed with each job and a control card would be registered with each movement in a central office. Every operation had its own number and a code for what had to be done against that number. For example, drilling holes had a certain number that would be marked off to show the stage it had reached. Unsurprisingly, Mr Isherwood of Lamson Paragon, had been pleased to meet me, knowing we were a large Company and would be giving him a huge volume of work. There was one shop floor that was so massive he admitted they had never set up anything across such a large area before. I thought about it for a moment and said, 'What goes up must come down. Surely if the wire has a gentle gradient going up to half way, then it would come down with momentum for the second half?' We tried it and it worked.

When I later became Assistant Customer Service Manager, my new boss was Ted Mead. He was what you would call a 'Jack the Lad', a womaniser and character. I liked him. He would take me with him to design meetings to observe. The Chief Designer, on the other hand, wasn't an easy man to get on with and didn't like anybody coming up with an idea or solution he had not thought of himself. In one meeting they began to talk about a dressing table that had a big mirror and wooden frame at back of it - a lovely piece - and the question came up of how it could be transported without damaging the mirror. I just nudged my manager and whispered, 'surely they can put a couple of hinges (butts) on the back there, flap that over down the back of the chest itself and hook it in place?' He saw it was a great idea and pushed me forward. 'Go on, speak up!' he said. The Chief designer looked at me daggers because I was just an assistant and he knew it was a great idea. Ted told me to put my idea into the suggestion box, which I did and got paid for.

I did many, many things at Lebus in Tottenham. At one stage, I was meeting customers and retailers in London to wine and dine them, sometimes taking them to the Palladium. I would meet rep's from all around the country, flying out to meet them at times and giving talks on how we were doing, showing them around the works.



At work with
my good
friend and
colleague
Ernie Worman

Eventually we were ready to bring the computers in. George Robey went across to France to see what the French Securite and Interpol had used. He bought this enormous machine back to the office called Logabax. The next job was to try to feed all our information into it, but other people did that, not me. Stock control and payroll had been the principal reasons for introducing it initially. I was instead put in charge of warehouse and dispatch. On dispatch, I was in charge of loads going all over the country using the computer we now had. But the computer couldn't account for any low bridges on routes for the transport. It was complicated and it had terrible teething troubles. Ironically, I was probably the only transport manager in the country who couldn't actually drive!

Although Lebus were real innovators and had the money, they sadly failed to keep up with the times. New companies such as G Plan were appearing offering flat packed cheaper furniture and more modern design. Business continued to slow down and so management brought in some 'whiz kids'. Successful people, but new to the furniture industry and, I think, only in it for their own ends. I can remember one man in particular, his interest was definitely not in our Company – to him it was just another highly paid position with power. This man was a big wig with Saxa Salt, he had no clue how furniture was made. They listened to him due to his success with his previous Company, when what they really needed was someone who knew the furniture trade and the people we dealt with. Our sales manager Mac (Mr Macclean) was an excellent sales person and yet suddenly they decided to get a new slant on selling and brought in a little 'whipper snapper' to replace him. The management was now being controlled by the banks. Oliver Lebus was perhaps too nice a man and a bit over controlled by them. I suppose it was difficult for him with shareholders involved. The direction they took was completely wrong.

By 1955, I moved to Melbourne Way. Then I moved to The Chimes in Benfleet in 1968 and, by that time, Harris Lebus was in real trouble, so much so, that the banks brought in Price Waterhouse. This became another traumatic time for me, as I was in charge of a lot of people and, overnight, I may have had to make a unit of around twenty employees redundant and reduce the staff down to two. My job was to put the names down. When I started working for Lebus, there must have been eighteen hundred to two thousand staff. Now there were only twenty to thirty of us left. The massive Tottenham site was sold to the Greater London Council (GLC), but the upholstery factory in Woodley was retained as it still seemed to be doing well enough. They also kept a little bedding unit in London that made divans and all the rest of it.

I was asked to take over customer service at Woodley. Leaving early Monday mornings, I commuted to Woodley and stayed over in hotels until returning home at the weekend - not very pleasant for Margaret. I stayed in some lovely hotels on the River Thames, Sonning and Henley, most often burning the midnight oil writing reports. To solve this problem, we bought a house in Woodley, 126 Loddenbridge Road. It was now 1970.

I had worked for Lebus for over thirty years and left of my own accord at the finish. I kept in touch with Oliver Lebus for many years. I kept the letter he wrote to me after I left, asking him for a reference.



In 1975 we lived briefly with my eldest son Chris and his first wife Jackie, until we bought our own home in Westcliff-on-sea. I used to go regularly into the local betting shop and the chap running it was a nice young man. He had a business partner whose wife ran a lingerie and corset making shop next door and they decided they wanted to sell up. I was keen, but Margaret was not happy about me taking it on, she thought it would be a risky venture. I realise now I had no real clue about bookmaking, but to be fair, I could never have foreseen the success of Red Rum who won races for four years running! I couldn't have chosen a worse time to do it. Nick was fifteen and leaving school in Woodley. I knew he had a sharp brain for figures and told him to come to join me to be my settler, working bets out. An elderly gentleman, Harold, who used

to be bookmaker at Southend greyhound track also helped me. He died and then things didn't go well at all, it was all costing me money. This was the only time in my life I worried about a duff investment. I lasted there about eighteen to twenty months until I finally gave in and sold it to a friend, Mick Fryers, who had a betting shop in Leigh-on-Sea with his partner Trixie.

For a short period I went to help them out in their shop in Leigh. I was working there with Trix when tragedy struck. Mick was in his fifties, reasonably fit and a keen golfer. So when he went to Southend Hospital for a minor operation, nobody was concerned about it. However, during the following night he developed a blood clot and suddenly died. Trix phoned me in tears with the shocking news. She asked if I would come to see her in the morning which of course I did. I suggested we open the shop and Trix agreed. She spent most of the day there crying. I am still in touch with her to this day.

Once sold up, I didn't panic. Margaret had a hankering to go to see her sister Doreen in Cleethorpes and so we moved to Crow Hill Avenue. Although close, they were as different as chalk and cheese and didn't get on that well, but it seemed the right thing to do at the time. Margaret's Aunt paid me to do a lot of work on her house. This kept us ticking over for a couple of years.

In 1980 I went into estate management. The Lady magazine was very popular and I saw an advert in it, applied and was offered the job. We moved to the Gate Cottage at Boxted Lodge estate near Colchester, owned by a city stockbroker and son of an important landowner. We were there for the best part of three years. He was a real gentleman and I also got on with his wife. They had a ha-ha around the property! I maintained certain parts of the lodge itself and helped out with the harvest. Margaret did a lot of good work with their animals - one of their horses got tangled up once in some barbed wire. When the vet came, Margaret volunteered to assist and he marvelled at how good she was. She always loved animals. I did all sorts of things.

While there, I also worked for a solicitor called Jasper Hunt and his wife Jenny, a very nice couple with a farm out in the countryside. Their children were Ionie and Edmund. I used to do whatever was necessary for them. In addition to all that, I also worked for Paddy Goodbody and his family. His father was a General. They had four children, Rosie, Daisy, Joy and Sam. See, my memory is still good for names! I suppose I was a workaholic working for three families, but I was never downhearted.

After three years, we went back to Beech Avenue in Leigh-on-Sea in 1983. Why? Just itchy feet - I needed a change. I thought it was about time I went into buying a property again and I did this with Tony as he couldn't take out a mortgage at the time. I put most of the money needed into it, but it was first time Tony did anything with his own money other than spend it on entertainment. He did moan about it interminably! But it turned out to be the best move he could have made - in only six months it increased in value by a quarter and he was later able to buy the place he has now. I moved back into estate management. I didn't worry much about not owning a home, after all, in my younger days everybody rented their homes and it had been a good arrangement. I blamed Maggie Thatcher for making everyone buy houses. I was never worried anyway, as I have always been great believer that a solution will always turn up - as indeed it did!

In 1985, I went to work for a brewery owner and family in Gosfield - between Braintree and Halstead - so we travelled around a bit. We stayed there for five years until I finally decided it was time to retire.

RETIREMENT



I retired in 1990, aged sixty five. I had decided enough was enough and I was ready for it! Margaret had never pushed me to stop working sooner, in fact all through my working life we were a team and she always supported me in whatever I was doing. Had I thought she felt really strongly against any of my thinking, I would have backed down. I never consciously did anything to upset her. I was ready for retirement. It really was not difficult to adjust to it, I have always been flexible. I was a man of decisions, I had to be. If you don't like a job it's purgatory, so don't do it! Not all the time, but overall, I enjoyed most of my working life and I was never bored.

Our friend Chris Burgess, who lived in the lakes, also had a flat in Leigh-on-Sea that he had kept on. We rented that from him and stayed there for five years. We could go out shopping together and join the family for special occasions. I never stopped getting up early, I still do even now. It was a lovely feeling to no longer be controlled by the job you've got to do.

Eventually, in 1995, we moved to Uppingham, as Chris and his wife Kath were renting Jasmine Cottage in Barrowden owned by Freda Dexter. Freda's niece Carolyn used to visit Kath to do her beauty treatments and told us about her grandmother's empty cottage. We visited for several Christmases and decided we liked the area, so we met Amy Dexter to talk about her property and decided to give it a go. We moved into 3 Mill Cottages on Glaston Road. Since then, I never had any regrets about making the move. We quickly adapted to being part of a friendly and happy tiny community with very close ties with the Dexter household and family. So much so, that today I am almost accepted as one of them.

We continued to spend our holidays in the Lakes with the boys, or rather I did, as Margaret was usually happy to stay at home. One memorable event was Nick's wife Carlene's fiftieth birthday. We all stayed at the Newfield Inn where our Chris was working with Chris Burgess. It was a very memorable and fun time.

The following year was our golden wedding anniversary. As far as I knew, Nick and Carlene were coming over with Chris' children and we were going out for a meal together. Tony couldn't make it due to an important football match he didn't want to miss and Chris was far away in the USA. After I went upstairs to get changed, Margaret called me to say there was someone here to see us - to my total surprise it was Chris and Kathy who had flown over especially to celebrate with us. A wonderful surprise for us both!



In 1998, I had a minor heart attack. I was feeling lethargic and short of breath, sweating profusely at home, so I went to see Dr. May, a first class doctor in the Uppingham surgery. He told me not to panic and to take a steady, slow walk home while he arranged for an ambulance to come to collect me. I told Margaret who kept me calm, as did Freda. Dr. May quickly came along himself and even stood at the bottom of the driveway to make sure the ambulance would not miss it. I was taken to the emergency heart section of the hospital. After tests, the specialist saw me and got my approval to do what was necessary – an injection - which they did during the night. I felt much better afterwards and this lovely young nurse Helen came and asked me if I wanted a cup of tea and slice of toast. I said ‘yes please!’ The next day Freda drove Margaret over to see me. I was already in a main ward. I thought no way am I staying here! The consultant spoke to me again and asked me if I smoked, to which I replied ‘not any more!’ He said I could go home the next day. They wheeled me out on a trolley and that was it. I had to take it easy for a time. I never touched a cigarette again - until a year ago.

It wasn't long before Margaret herself developed health problems. She had to go to Glenfield Hospital and it turned out she was in a more serious state than I was. After that she regularly went to Oakham hospital for heart check-ups and later struggled with walking; she had to use a stick.

Then, on 12th March 2008, I was making breakfast with eggs on the boil when I heard this terrible shout. I found Margaret in the dining room on the floor, propped up against the wall. I could instantly see she wasn't right, so I dialled 999. They tried to give me instructions over the telephone, but it was impossible, I just didn't have the strength to do it. An ambulance arrived fairly quickly but, unfortunately for us, not a heart unit one. They took over from there until a heart ambulance did arrive and parked outside Mill House. It took us both to Peterborough Hospital, so I was with Margaret while the medic was working on her all the way with different bits of equipment. Once there, I was taken into a special room where I was told to wait. Ten minutes later, a young lady came in, took hold of my hand and told me that Margaret had died. In hindsight, I could later see she had gradually been deteriorating in health during the previous few weeks and felt glad that she hadn't suffered for too long at the end, but obviously it came as a terrible shock at the time. It all seemed to have happened so quickly. I phoned Freda who came over to pick me up. She was very, very kind. Once home, I phoned Tony and Nick who both came straight over to be with me. Chris had only just got back to the USA the previous Sunday having just been to visit. I phoned him to break the news and spoke to Kath as he was out at work. Chris was totally shaken and was back again within a week.

Margaret and I had never discussed what we would do if one of us passed away. I was always conscious of it, but never spoke because, right up to that point in time, we had been carrying on as normal. You don't try to write yourself off before it happens. I recently chose Chris to take all the information about what I want after my death and told him when he was last here. I can trust him to keep it to himself until the time comes. Chris, together with Carlene, had sorted Margaret's clothes out for me and taken them to charity shops –he handled that very difficult task really well and showed me what he is capable of. Nick has too much on his plate these days with his complicated private life. Tony may be most caring person, but I don't think he would cope well. He seems to think I am going to go on forever and will be most in shock. He always says ‘we can do this and that Dad’ to which I reply, ‘Tony, I can't do it anymore!’

I have been in Uppingham for eighteen years now, having been retired for twenty three, and now - after over sixty five years together- Margaret is gone and I am alone.

Now it's just my wonderful neighbour and friend, Freda, and myself, although I have a close friendship with most of her relatives that visit. Freda and myself meet up most days to chat and help each other with any problems that arise and also have a lunch somewhere together now and then. She is a great friend to have, with a heart of gold. She drives me into town most mornings so I can do my shopping, which I do appreciate, as I can no longer walk far and I know she herself is finding it increasingly difficult to get about. Things will without doubt change for us both in the not too distant future, but we don't dwell on it.!

Fortunately, I am still in quite good health and of sound mind. I still get up at six o'clock most mornings and, although I know I am less able to do the things I used to, I discipline myself to keep the place tidy and cook my meals. I still like to place my bets each day on the horses, as I can watch the races on Sky Sport. Other than seeing Eric Dalby from the number two cottage, I do miss male company here, so am grateful for the daily contact I get from my sons who all ring me when they can to discuss sport and check that I am feeling well.



At the races with the boys



Holiday in the Lakes - Newfield Inn



PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I was brought up with good Christian values, but I am not religious. In my opinion, religions around the world, with all their various sets and beliefs and hard and strict rules, cause more upsets and deaths than all other grievances put together. I do believe that it is far more important that through your entire life you strive to be a caring, loving and sincere member of society, helping those less fortunate than yourself. You do not need to attend church or sing hymns to qualify as a good Christian - a good daily deed has much more value. I am not a spiritual person either - I only believe in what is real in life, backed up by hard proven facts.

I have never been involved in politics. I never had a need to. In the old days, it wasn't a strong thing, it certainly wasn't all this continuous party politics that we have nowadays. Party politics gets you nowhere - they spend so much time in parliament today arguing and coming up with nothing worthwhile, not focusing on the essentials such as the health service or our banking system. The general attitude of people as a whole is wrong and now this has deepened, with each decade gaining a different slant on life. Nobody follows the rules any more. Today anything seems to go, young girls are getting pregnant all the time. The UK population has grown from forty to sixty million. This is what has caused strain on everything, but nobody ever says that. If ever a man spoke the truth it was Enoch Powell. If only they had taken notice of him. Politics didn't really come into the papers until recent years. Now, every day, they are full of it, yet it all means nothing!

I can honestly say that this present era is by far the worst in my lifetime and in so many ways. Reflecting back, I feel very privileged and lucky to have always been part of a happy and loving family life. Firstly, with my parents and brothers and, secondly, with Margaret and our three sons. This has probably helped to influence my overall thinking of the level of standards a person should live by to be a caring and acceptable member of society. Friendly, honest, helpful, willing to advise and compassionate. These were the values that I found most people lived by in the thirties to sixties, when almost everything was generally in a stable and efficient state. Stable prices, honest banking, efficient hospitals and workplaces with no sign of greed and envy - people were generally satisfied with the overall pattern of their weekly lives. You were taught to value money and only spent what you could afford and saved for that extra luxury. You strived to better yourself in whatever job you did and were normally justly rewarded. This made people more relaxed to enjoy their simple pleasures and more friendly and happy with each others company. However, from the seventies to the present day, with the freedom of borrowing from banks, people lost control of their finances in attempting to purchase their own homes, have a car each and holidays abroad. It seems to me that many people purchase anything they take a fancy to without self discipline. Envy, greed, keeping up with Joneses, one-up-manship, all crept into everyday life resulting in peoples attitudes towards each other taking a major downturn, which in turn has had a disastrous effect on family life. All of this, plus joining the European Union, then opening the flood gates letting millions of people come to Britain to 'milk' our welfare system, creating a job shortage, overburdening the health service and creating a housing shortage - the list goes on! Corruption and dishonesty at all levels, government banking services with inefficiencies becoming normal rather than rare.

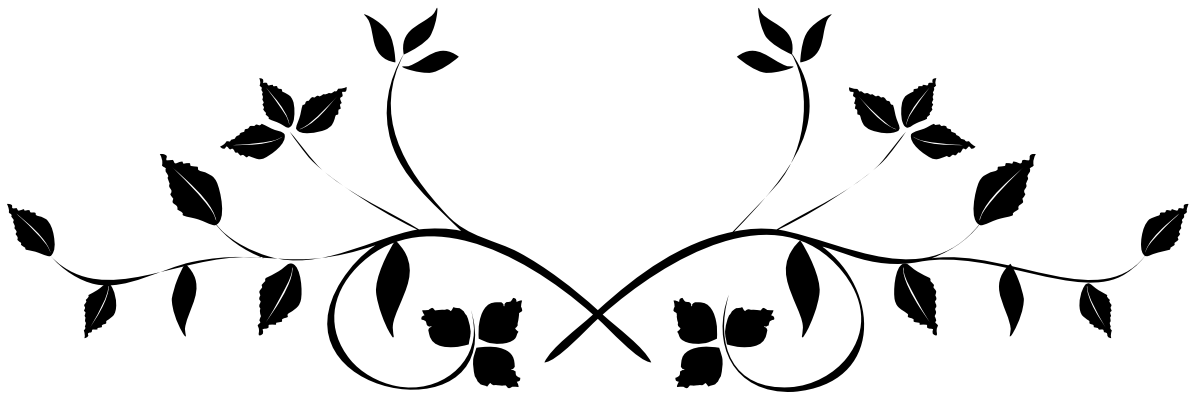
I do worry about the younger generation as I don't see a good future for them. The 'going down hill' of society has been snowballing since the seventies and it gets worse in every way, especially with the growing population. Only the incredible and rapid advances in technology have been positive, particularly in medical research, but that doesn't make a better society. It's the overall attitude of people to life that matters.

Yes, this is by far the worst era in my life, but I am compensated by my total contentment with my current daily life living amongst a wonderful little group of friends and neighbours.

So to the present day, where the memoirs of my life to date would certainly not be complete without mention of Victoria George, the instigator and orchestrator of putting my life's memories on record.

During these past few months of my life, she has given me the worthwhile incentive to enjoy them, with the numerous varied and interesting things we have been involved in together.

For this I am very grateful.



This is a short memoir of my life written for my three sons, Tony, Chris and Nick.

I recently realised that I have never spoken to any of them about my early life or explained what I did during the war and my subsequent thirty year career at Harris Lebus. It was not something I was brought up to do, we always lived for the day or looked ahead, we never tried to explain the past. As a result, I sadly have very little knowledge of my own parents lives to pass on.

This little book therefore concentrates primarily on details of the years preceding my retirement, ending with some thoughts and reflections. I hope you will enjoy reading it and that it will be passed on to future generations.

September 2013

