



## *Growing up in Oxenbridge Row.*

*By Linda Neve*

### **Growing Up in Oxenbridge Row**

In 1947, my Parents, Edmund and Marjorie Mewett, together with my eldest brother Brian and my twin brothers, John and Peter, moved into the newly built No 4 Oxenbridge Row. I was born in August 1948.

The house consisted of three bedrooms, a bathroom, small kitchen, dining cum living room plus a small sitting room that could double-up as an extra bedroom. There was an outside toilet and a coal shed in the passageway together with a brick built shed. Outside there was a vegetable garden at the back of the house and at the front there was a lawn and flower beds. These only came into being after much effort by my Dad, as when they moved in it had the after effects of a building site.

When I was about four years old a new addition to the family arrived, a ginger tom cat kitten who we called 'Twink'. He was thoroughly loved and spoilt, and lived to be twenty one years old. In his lifetime one of his 'party pieces' was to scare us silly by jumping on a little galvanised shed in the back garden, then on to the brick shed and finally on to the house roof, where he would proceed to walk the length of all the houses to see if he could get at any nesting birds. Thankfully he wasn't very successful.

On another occasion, on a frosty night, Twink was trying to get into my bedroom window, but with little success as he kept sliding on the roof. So my twin brothers managed, eventually, to catch him by the one holding the other by his legs and dangling out of the window as Twink slid past!

At this time Etchingam Football Club had their pitch at the back of the old Village Hall, so during the season and when they were playing at home, I would join my Mum and three brothers to watch the matches, as my Dad was Captain and my twin brothers were the 'mascots'.

Later, the second field on the left, as you travel out of the village down Oxenbridge Lane, became their new pitch. This unfortunately was prone to flooding during the winter months so near the end of the season, evening matches had to be arranged to complete the fixtures.

Life in those days was so different. Everyday, Bob Baker delivered milk from his farm at Hillside Sheepstreet Lane, in either two or one pint bottles. We didn't have the luxury of a 'fridge' or Freezer. The baker would come from Sedlescombe, three times a week. On certain Sundays a Fishman from Hastings would come with his covered basket full of shrimps. How I loved this when it happened as I

adore shrimps! Several years later a fishman used to come on Wednesday mornings and we learnt that it was his father who had brought the shrimps.

When the fishman arrived, our neighbour's cat 'Thomas a Beckett' would wait to be given a fish head which he enjoyed, but left us feeling quite sick! The cat's other nickname was 'Hedgehopper' as he could walk all around the garden on the prickly hedges. His other 'party piece' was to jump on Mum's bike saddle for a ride up the garden path, and then he spent ages sitting on it, when it was left outside the kitchen window.

Once a fortnight, Mr Hayler, the local coalman, delivered coal and coke. This was needed for the open fires as there was no central heating. The coke was needed for the black range in the kitchen to provide us with hot water and so Mum could cook on it. What lovely memories I have of toasting a slice of bread or a crumpet for tea on a cold winter's evening. Also the smell of the Sunday Roast coming from the Range.

As the kitchen was small, on a Sunday lunchtime, my Dad would carve the joint at the dining room table and my brothers and I would queue at the door leading in to the kitchen, waiting for our turn to have Mum put the vegetables and gravy on our plates. In the summer, for a pudding with Sunday lunch, Dad would buy a one shilling or one shilling and sixpence block of Wall's Ice-cream. This had to be bought by 11.0'clock as the Old Post Office closed then after selling the newspapers. The precious ice-cream block was carefully wrapped in newspaper and then a piece of blanket to stop it melting.

Christmas was a magical time in those days. Nobody knew what they would receive from Father Christmas. In the morning we would come down to the living/dining room, decorated with paper chains and a lovely Christmas Tree, which we were told, the fairies had done during the night. When we went into the sitting room, Father Christmas had come down the chimney and left presents. Later the fire was lit for us to open our presents by. This couldn't have been lit earlier, otherwise Father Christmas might have got a burnt bottom! The kitchen smelt of roasting chicken, which was a luxury in those days.

One Christmas, after tea, when my Nan and Grandad Weston were there, my bothers and I planned to do a little show for them. I was to be a dolly, so to make me look more realistic, they tied a polythene bag over my head, only to find it was not such a good idea when I suddenly couldn't breathe very well. Nowadays, thankfully we know what can happen in these situations but polythene bags were quite new in those days, and we didn't realise the danger. Hence that year our planned show never went ahead.

Because we never had a television until the late 'sixties, we had to make our own amusements when we were indoors. I spent hours playing with my dolls and my Grandfather Mewett made me a lovely cot for them which had a drop-side to it. My twin brothers loved making houses with their 'Baco' building set or having a game of 'Subbuteo' football. As a family we played 'Hunt the thimble', Ludo, Snakes and Ladders, Happy Families, Snap and also shared trying to complete a jig-saw puzzle. In the living room was Mum's piano which we would have a sing song together around. She was often requested to play this when we had Birthday Parties.

During those early years, there were at least twenty children in the Row of various ages, but we all got on very well. Outside the garden gate of No 2, a hole was made in the strip of grass. Here many a game of marbles was played. On a summer's evening in the road, we would play a game of rounders, as very few cars went past. The only thing we had to worry about was if the ball was hit into the garden of Mr and Mrs Charles Dengate, who lived in Brookside, as Mrs Dengate would knock the window and wave her finger at us. So we would have someone on 'lookout' whilst one of us ran behind their bean row to try and find the ball! I spent many happy hours with my friends Angela and Linda Becker, blowing bubbles or walking around on stilts made from syrup tins.

My nextdoor neighbour at No 5, Colin Muddle, had a proper pair of wooden stilts and he was able to walk up their sloping garden path on them and also he could often be seen walking in the river Dudwell, on them.

At the bottom of the houses where there is now a carpark, there were some allotments. My Dad had one of these so he could grow extra vegetables. My twin brothers built a lovely hut out of wood and grass down there, and when they no longer wanted it, I inherited it and with Angela and Linda used it as a play house.

We also spent many happy hours by the stream that ran from the second brick bridge down the field. Here we used to fish for tiddlers using a jam jar tied with a handle of string and some soggy squashed bread to encourage them in. After counting how many we had managed to catch they were safely put back into the stream.

It was in summer that several of us would gather on a warm day armed with swimming costumes, towels and old shoes to wear in the river and we would then walk up the fields by the river Dudwell for about a quarter of a mile to a place we called the Paddling Pool, where we spent many happy hours, paddling and trying to learn to swim.

As most of us didn't own a watch, another tradition of Oxenbridge Row began. When we were all out on our many adventures, Mum started blowing a whistle loudly three times, which echoed over the fields, and on hearing this we all knew it was time to go home, for either dinner, tea or bed-time. This had always been such a part of our childhood that it was later mentioned at her funeral. As we got older, the venue for a swim changed to the ever popular Pool Bay in the Rother and we would stay till nearly 10 o'clock at night if it was a lovely evening.

Throughout the year so many of our daylight hours were spent outside. Our favourite haunts on these occasions were three of the local woods. The first we call Roffs Wood, which was the small piece of woodland on the left side of the road as you go up Oxenbridge Hill. This was named after Mr Roff who was the husband of the Caretaker at the Primary School. I think he owned part of the land at the bottom of the hill and had a large shed on it. He also grew some fruit and vegetables here and also had some chicken in a caged area near the wood. Most days we would see him coming along the road on his old 'sit up and beg' bike to feed them. In here was a small ditch that ran over the bank where we used to find clay-like mud, from which we created things.

The boys loved to swing from tree to tree to see how far they could move without touching the ground. When Colin Muddle visited, the other year, for a holiday from Australia, where he emigrated to in the late 'sixties, he could not resist going back into the wood as he was recalling an incident with his brother, Nigel, when they were tree walking there and ended up overlooking the field where they were combining, and with that the tree broke and and they both fell into the field. Luckily neither of them were hurt .

Across the field there was another wood which we called Big Wood although it wasn't very big. Many hours were also spent here, exploring and thoroughly enjoying ourselves. The third wood was two fields across from Brookside Farm and to this day is known to all who lived in the Row as 'Fairy Glen'. I think its real name is Old Womans Wood, but I am not a hundred per cent certain. In those days picking primroses and bluebells wasn't dis-allowed, and in the spring I would head up there with my friends and with a ball of wool in my pocket to pick bunches of primroses, formed them into posies and then tied the wool round and attached them to a stick to carry them home. Another wood which we visited, but out of whistle earshot was Burgh Wood.

It was here one spring when my brothers were about ten years old, together with some of the other boys from the Row, that they found two baby tawny owls that had fallen out of their nest. They brought them home, but the one the other family had, did not survive. We called ours , 'Ossy'. He thankfully prospered and lived in a big cage in the back garden. He was taken out in the evenings, but never attempted to fly away. He liked to sit on my Mum's head as she walked around the garden. We fed him on raw meat from the local butcher, Nelson Jarvis who provided us with a rabbit skin so that we could rub the meat with and Ossy would produce pellets like he would have done in the wild. He was quite a celebrity and was pictured with my twin brothers in a local newspaper.

Unfortunately, one night when he was outside with Mum he fell to the ground and was struggling to move. Dad took him to the vets in Hastings (where he worked as a Dental Mechanic) the next day. When he returned that evening, he told us that Ossy had died on the journey. It wasn't until we were

all grown up that Mum told us the exact truth. Apparently, the Vet said on examining him, that he was starting to get paralysis as a result of him falling out of the nest, so the kindest thing to do was to 'put him to sleep'.

A few years later another feathered casualty arrived. This was a 'Tufted Duck' that the Paper Boy in the village, had found which had damage to his wing and couldn't fly. It didn't take long for a safe run to be built in the back garden, together with a small hut for him to sleep in. To make his life even better, an old bath from Oliver and Russell's the builder, just up the road, was purchased and sunk into the ground so he could enjoy a swim. We had him for quite a while, but when we had the freezing weather in 1963 Mum went to check him in the afternoon, and he had been overcome by the cold weather.

My brother, Brian was eight years older than me so, after he had taken his 'O' Levels he applied to the Post Office, (now BT) to become a telephone engineer. He passed his entrance exam and started his training, but this involved him going into 'digs' in Tunbridge Wells. He also went away on Courses to Bletchley and Stone. I was very sad when this happened as we all missed him. Thankfully, in time he passed his Driving Test and got an old car so he could live back home until he was married.

As we all started to grow up, times changed as people left school and started work. When I left school I went to Hastings College to study Catering. From there, I started work at Lillesden School in Hawkhurst, which was a Boarding School and I lived in. In holiday times I was back home in Oxenbridge Row. It was at the school that I met Nigel. From No 4 Oxenbridge Row on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1970 I walked down the path as a Bride.

For the next ten years I visited Mum there until she moved into Park Farm Close in January 1980. It was quite sad to close the door of No 4 for the last time as she had lived there for thirty-three years. Life today will never be the same as we had for the children. We enjoyed so much more freedom and had to make our own amusement. When Nigel and I walk Bertie our dog, past No 4 I can't help but remember all the fun and laughter I had during my childhood there.

*Linda Neve, June 2015*