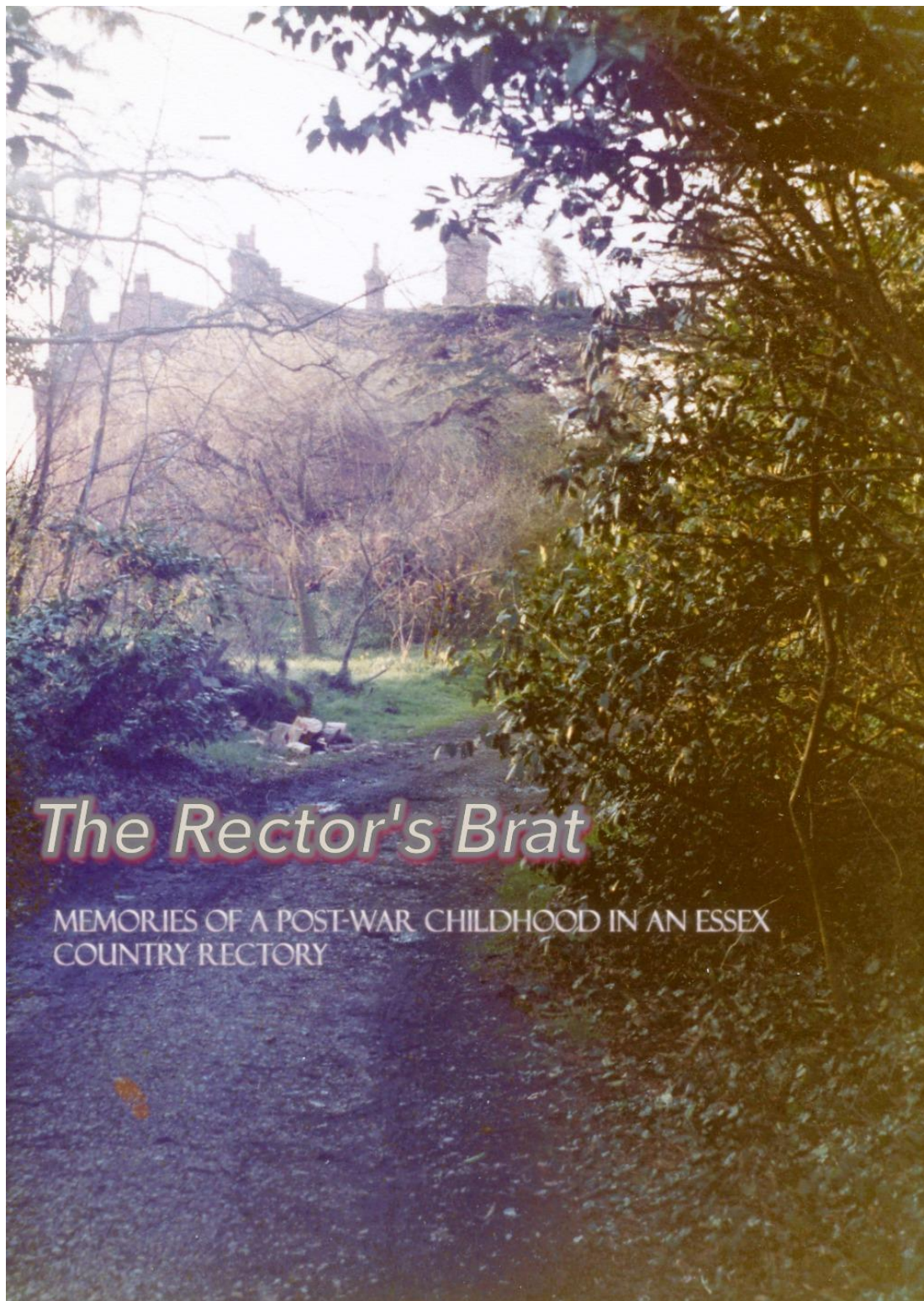




# *The Rector's Brat*

MEMORIES OF A POST-WAR CHILDHOOD IN AN ESSEX  
COUNTRY RECTORY



Pat Ost with Desmond Ost, Rector of All Saints East Hanningfield, 1982

## **THE RECTOR'S BRAT**

(Memories of a postwar childhood in an Essex country rectory)

by

Pat Ost

## Dedication

To the memory of **Dr James Alexander Ost**

Sometime Head of Department and Reader in Applied Cognitive Psychology, University of Portsmouth and  
first editor of this book

**1973 - 2019**

Also, in fondest memory of my parents **Desmond** and **Dora**, and the very, very happy childhood that they gave me. Both Martin and I had support and endless love while growing up, and space, and huge tolerance, to make our many mistakes.

This “rambling and disjointed account” was written with love, for the amusement of my children James and Katharine, for the amusement and instruction of my grandchildren Joshua, Joseph and Samuel, (and for any friends or wider family members who might also be interested in my ramblings) in my attempt to get all this clutter of memories out of my head, and down onto paper. Please don't judge me too harshly for trying, but I am at this moment (2020) at the center of, and having personal knowledge of, five generations of our family, two in memory, three now living, and if *I* don't attempt to tell the story of those who have passed, who will? I hope some of it, at least, will inform and amuse the reader, but I'm sure there may be boring and repetitive bits too. You don't have to read it all, but I thank you for your interest so far!

One way to know a little of shared family history, of me, and of your grandparents, great grandparents and those older generations, may be through these stories I choose to tell you, but telling them could take some time! This way, you can choose what you wish to read about, and when to read it, and it saves me having to annoy you, by repeating myself!

This is for you all.

Pat

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identified as the author of this work

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### Foreword

**Sadly, the death of my mother**, and more recently of her sisters Beth and Nancy, has forcefully reminded me that the details of the way I was brought up, and the world in which I grew, is now almost entirely inside my own head, while the busy world of the present has moved on. Only tokens remain of the world in which I grew up, and in which my parents lived and worked.

I'm aware of the photographic images of this vanished world I can still see in my head, but these are not well matched by real or tangible collections of photographs or descriptions. So many images and memories crowd in, but knowing what has been lost from this procession, with the passing of my parents, and the blurring of the memories themselves, I'm now prompted to try to record at least a shadow of these things.

In my conceit, I imagine that at some point in the future, my grandchildren or even my children may have the leisure to reflect on the lives of their forbears and may find that they have distressingly little with which to flesh out the bare skeleton of dates of births, marriages, and deaths, of those 'faces in those pictures'. What sort of lives did we live? What did we feel and wish for? I can't hope to do more than sketch out, while I can, a little slice of my boyhood, and what I remember, and more fleetingly, what my parents did and what they told me about their parents.

I hope to record some of those memories and a few of those family stories that will never appear in the 'official records' but may throw some gentle light on those members of our family, who lived their lives to the full, but who threw almost no shadow in the wider world.

Some religions talk of life after death, holding out promises for those who follow them. I know the form of such things but take no comfort in their dreams and mysteries. An older, wiser, tradition spoke of, and took comfort in, the memory of those who had gone before, and who made 'the now' possible. This work, with all its faults, is offered to my children in that spirit. I hope that they may be amused by my attempt to record events and people so that they come in time to know a little more about those who went before, who made their life, and mine, possible.

The views of events and the characters portrayed are my reflection on my own memories. I apologize to the reader if you find my account wanting – the faults and omissions are entirely my own.

Thomas Patrick Arthur Ost

Mary Anns Cottage, Newhaven, East Sussex

December 2020

## Chapter 5

### Back in Essex - Granny Rayleigh and Aunty Paddy

**I'm sorry to say that my personal memories of my Granny Ost** (Granny Rayleigh to us little 'uns) are somewhat negative and really very unfair, as she had been a good-looking lady in her prime, and had, one might say, 'been through a lot' in her years with my granddad. I remember her as a very stout, and rather distant, old lady – she would have been in her late 70's when I first really remember her, too old, and too distracted by illness and life, to be anything but rather frightening to small children. This was at her first house in Rayleigh, just around the corner from the High Street, nearly opposite the church. She lived to a good age (86) and when she died in 1960, she was buried in the family grave at East Hanningfield, with my grandfather Audley Alfred, and her sister-in law Ellen, Audley Alfred's older sister.



*1950: Three generations of Osts at 18 Hockley Road, Rayleigh. Left to right; the author aged 2, Dora Ost, Desmond Ost, Miss Evertt (one of granny's friends) and, in the doorway, Granny Rayleigh herself, Christina Mary Ost.*

To those of us who are old enough recall the 'Giles' cartoons from the Daily Express, Grandma Giles was a pretty good likeness for Granny Rayleigh at that stage in life, short, stout, always dressed in black and of a grumpy disposition. Her establishment struck me as rather peculiar in some respects. The house (it is still in existence, so I apologize in advance to its current owners) was an ancient wooden framed and weather boarded Essex house of some size. However, like most houses of its age and type, it had been built with green timber, with the result that the seasoned house had no really level floors, or indeed floorboards that joined together, as sensible planks are supposed to do. The stairs were decidedly challenging as the stair treads themselves seemed to lean in all directions. The inhabitants appeared to my tender eye to match the house somewhat, with the exception of my Aunt Paddy, who was kindness itself, and the real power behind the establishment.



**1950:** *'The Ferns', 18 Hockley Road, Rayleigh, was the first house I associate with my paternal grandmother, and the reason for her being 'Granny Rayleigh' for all my childhood. This is where we arrived on Christmas Day afternoons. It doesn't appear to have changed that much, (at least externally) when I last saw it in 2024.*

Gran kept a strange elderly Irish lady as a sort of servant/companion, but my memory was that she was quite mad and just a little bit smelly, which didn't help any sort of bonding. The other, very smelly thing in that household was the chest of drawers in the kitchen, which could be opened to reveal the latest in a long line of families of cats, lying snugly together, semi-wild on layers of old towels, rendered solid by several generations worth of feline incontinence and matted hair. The smell seemed to permeate the whole house but only visitors appeared to notice or to wonder what caused the stench. I don't remember eating anything beyond bread and butter in that house.

Some years later, Granny came to live with us at Hanningfield 'between houses', as it were, before moving to her last house, a bungalow in Eastwood Road Rayleigh. Fortunately, neither cats, nor her old servant, accompanied her, but her temper had not improved, and my memory is of my keeping at a safe distance from Gran at all times, just to be sure. I'm sorry to say that I was not unhappy when she departed to Rayleigh again.

In earlier and hopefully happier times, she was the daughter of a well-to-do equine veterinary surgeon, living the life of a fashionable Victorian young lady in New Bond Street, London. Father was Thomas Aitken Dollar, by 'Royal Appointment' veterinary surgeon to Queen Victoria, and Kings Edward VII in succession, so the Dollars may well have been 'trade', but they were top of the tree 'trade' and were clearly wealthy and very well respected. Christiana was the only child of his marriage with a 33 year-old widow, Christiana Major Watts, who had one daughter and four sons from her first marriage. From this photograph of her at 18, in 1894, she was a very good-looking and fashionable young lady.



This being **1894**, fashionable dress for her social class (being the daughter of the Royal family's equine vet, living in Bond Street London) was all about reflecting Queen Victoria's permanent state of mourning, dressed ready for the formal photograph below.



***1894:** Christiana Mary Dollar, my grandmother, aged 18.*

We think she may have met my grandfather around 1889, when he was 28 years old and priest in charge of St. Mary Magdalene, Bermondsey, and when she would have been about fifteen, but there is no record of that occasion. There may have been some sort of introduction via the wider London professional associations in London; her older brothers would have certainly be moving in such circles as they qualified to join their father in the family business. Why this would have included a penniless curate in an East London parish is unclear, but the Dollar family had equine vet practices (called forges) in the East End, as the docks used hundreds of horses. At that time, Tom Dollar, Christina's father, owned and operated five forges across London, one being in Bond Street, and at least one other in the East End.

*As befitted the daughter of a wealthy horseman, Granny was taught the art of carriage driving and drove in Hyde Park. After her death, we inherited her driver's whip, with a long, elegant holly handle and a short, plaited leather lash. Nice as it was, not being ever likely to drive carriages, we donated it to one of the museums at Colchester Castle.*

**1905:** *My grandfather, Audley Alfred Ost, aged 44, photographed in Cannes after his return, in September of that year, from missionary service in South America. He was taking a break in France in an attempt to recover from malaria acquired during his missionary service.*



However, and wherever they met, Christiana Mary Aitken Dollar (nicknamed 'Tiny' in the family), delayed marriage all the while her father was alive. It was only after his death in 1909, by which time my grandfather had completed his service in London and then completed ten years of missionary service in Guyana, that she appears to have entertained the thought of marriage. After a short period in France, recovering from malaria acquired during his time in Guyana, Audley Alfred returned to Ireland to find himself a living, first in Dunmore, County Galway, and then, in 1910, the Deanery in Achonry, County Sligo. The Deanery was a large house, suitable for raising a family and marriage seems to have followed rapidly thereafter. Audley Alfred was 49, and Christiana 34.

I cannot believe that as a wealthy young lady, in the middle of the best part of London, she would have been short of potential suitors. Perhaps the example of her elder sister Lillah tempered her enthusiasm for meeting dashing young men.

Lillah, eighteen years older than Christiana, had married a charming playboy and man-about-town, Archibald Robinson, in 1882, a few years before Audley Alfred appeared on the scene. Unfortunately, the playboy had played the field so well that he got himself infected with syphilis and passed this on to Lillah. He died young, possibly as a direct result of his infection. As Lillah found out the hard way, there was no effective treatment for the infection, and many families lost children who either died in early infancy or were born blind as a result. In Lillah's case, both her daughters developed tertiary syphilis which apparently caused mental health problems, resulting in them spending most of their long lives

locked away in mental hospitals. They were definitely *not* a topic of conversation in the family, although Desmond was one of the trustees for the family trust that paid for their care, (or incarceration). I still don't know whether they were kept locked up because they were we would call 'vulnerable' these days, or if the family thought it best to keep them under lock and key in case they passed the disease on. Either explanation is credible given the ease with which females could be committed to these institutions at that period.

We inadvertently revived memories of this family scandal sometime around 1980, when it was clear that Mum and Dad would have to leave the old rectory. In helping Dad clear the 'servant's bedroom' in the attic of the back kitchen, we came across a basket full of family correspondence, some of it from Christiana. Instead of removing this to a place of safety, I made the error of asking permission to read some of the letters. Dad then burnt the lot and a slice of family and social history went up in smoke – I have never forgiven myself.

Clearly, by the time she met my grandfather, the 'problem with Archibald' would have been hinted at, if not discussed in that family, and Christiana would have had a strong steer towards the 'safer sort of chap', if she had not already, as I suspect, made her choice. It is also possible that as the youngest daughter, she was expected to stay at home to look after her parents.

Audley Alfred departed on missionary business, having first got training as a gunsmith (apparently on the premise that if 'they' wouldn't come to hear the word of God, 'they' would definitely come to the mission station to get their muskets repaired). Anyway, Audley Alfred had a strong intention of becoming a 'hunting, fishing parson' as soon as he could, so that would always come in handy! He seems to have had a strong mechanical bent, according to family tradition.

He was directed to the Pomeroon Indians in Guyana in 1894, taking his older sister Ellen along as his housekeeper and moral compass. It was not until 1904 that he returned from South America, with big sister and also with his very young native Indian servant Theripu in tow. (We can see from the 1911 census that Theripu, as Desmond always called him, had been given a new name either when he was baptised in British Guyana or on arrival in England. 'Theripu' appears as ***Robinson McIntyre, aged 20***, in the census record, so he would have been only 13 when he came to England. The record is silent on how he ended up as Audley Alfred's servant at such a young age)

Audley Alfred did not, as the romantic novelists would have us believe, sweep the faithful Christiana away with him on his return. Whether she was now firmly established as her father and mother's helpmate and companion, or whether Audley Alfred asked her to wait until he was established in a good church living, we will never know. The decisive factor seemed to be her father's death in 1909, which almost certainly left Christiana with some significant settlement, as the older members of the family were already married or established in business. Audley and Christiana did not finally get married until June 1910, when Audley Alfred was into his second parish in Ireland. He was 49, and she was 34, and their first marital home was the Deanery at Achonry near Tobercurry, Sligo. Curiously, AAO records his age as '48' in 1911 when the census records him and his modest establishment of 'husband and wife, housemaid, cook and groom' at the Deanery.

Prior to getting married, my grandfather first took up a living at Dunmore, County Galway, around 1906, on his return from South America. Martin has in his possession a cycle map of the west of Ireland, with all the Church of Ireland parish houses marked with little red crosses, and it is the family tradition that he cycled around that part of Ireland, to inspect all the potential livings! He finally selected the living near Tobercurry as being suitable for his needs, to be appointed as the Canon to the local Church of Ireland cathedral in **1915**. He was known as 'Canon Ost' for the rest of his life.

They certainly went in for long engagements in those days, (maybe as long as 21 years in their case), but that didn't inhibit them from starting a family. After a tragic false start (losing their first child at birth) they went on to produce my father in 1913 and my aunt Paddy in 1915. By that time the world was a very different place from London in 1889.

To return to my aunt Paddy. She clearly inherited the 'independent streak' of the rest of the Dollar clan by training as a book-keeper, to provide herself with an income in her own right, after my grandfather's death in 1939, and the family's eviction from East Hanningfield Rectory just before WW11 started. From then on, Granny and Paddy had to fend for themselves for housing and income, and there is no record that the church assisted in their relocation. Granny bought a property in Chelmsford for her and Paddy, where they are recorded as living in the census taken at the beginning of the war, as a data base for the issue of ID and ration cards. She later sold that house (to the Diocese, it seems) and maybe the house in Rayleigh was part of a deal in church property around that.

My father had the possibility, through the Dollar's possession of the 'Right of Presentment' to the living at East Hanningfield, of returning as the incumbent. Paddy had no such 'insurance' and clearly needed a job and independence. As a book keeper, Paddy found employment with a number of charities which were based in London, and she seems to have finally specialized in handling the tax returns for these organisations. Living in Rayleigh gave Paddy an easy commute into Liverpool Street, while allowing her time to support granny, and we visited Paddy in Rayleigh quite often; I remember her at the Rectory as well, at one time getting out a pair of WW1 field glasses to show Martin and I a short-eared owl, sitting in one of the trees surrounding the garden.

However, I don't think she and Dora got on very well for some reason; it may simply have been that she thought that Desmond had 'married below his social status', and she was annoyed that Granny treated Dora, Desmond and herself as equals. What really upset her was to find out that Granny had also treated all of them as equals in her will. It may be co-incidence but after Granny's death in 1960, Paddy decided to leave Essex behind and move to rural Pluckley in Kent, to be close to an old school friend she liked, and even closer to a station on a direct line into London, for work.

Retirement for Paddy came slowly, but followed an amusing pattern. As each of her employers began to 'embrace the advantages of computers', her tax accountancy work ceased. After a few weeks or months, she would be asked to come back to do her old job again, as the 'miracle of the computer' had failed to cope with the complexities of tax accountancy! Visiting Paddy in Kent was a journey into a simpler age. She was never one for home comforts, and her Stone Abbaye 'end of terrace' cottage was almost monastic in simplicity, without central heating, carpets or appliances that you or I would consider essential. Her cottage had a large wild garden, a large wild black cat and a collection of Beatrix Potter

books including editions in other European languages. She seemed very happy in her ascetic existence to the end of her days. This was not a matter of a lack of money as she had invested well and left a considerable amount of money to both Martin and I at the end, for which I remain extremely grateful, as it left me more options after my redundancy in 2003.

## Chapter 6

**The grandfather I never knew (and other family stories from Dad and Paddy)**

I have been fortunate to have known three of my grandparents, but as Audley Alfred died nine years before I was born, I have to reconstruct my knowledge of him from fragments of information, to try to understand the man he was. I'm not at all sure I would have found much common ground with him, and I have no idea what he would have made of me, given the different expectations of someone raised as a Victorian from a middle-class background, clearly with a very formal religious background, where I'm sure the questions I have about the basis of his religion (if not his commitment to his personal faith) would have been regarded as offensive. There are, however, some common threads which give me comfort.



**1920:** *The Ost family, photographed in London, but at the time when they must have been thinking about the possibility of a move to England, as wealthy Church of Ireland ministers were Nationalist targets, back in Ireland.. An incident soon after this photograph was taken made the decision for them, and everyone in this picture would see their friends and neighbours murdered and left hanging at the roadside. Granddad was 59, my father was 7, Aunt Paddy 5 and Granny*

*44.*

He was clearly a practical man, loving 'things mechanical', and was a trained gunsmith. He dismantled and repaired clocks. Owning a motor vehicle in an age when they were usually the sole preserve of the

very well off, presumes that he could maintain that motor vehicles himself, with limited assistance, as there were not many motor mechanics or garages in that part of Ireland. Since my grandfather was not, as far as I know, ever wealthy (although Christiana clearly was not short of cash) he must have had some practical ability to keep his car running. The family story was that his car, a 1908 Lancaster town carriage, was bought second-hand from a wealthy lady in Dublin around the time of Granddad's marriage in 1910. This is likely as he may have finally had access to some of the Dollar money when he married my grandmother.

The car, with Granddad's help, survived through the First War, and the following Irish Civil War, unrequisitioned, as the soldiers who would have 'borrowed' it for military purposes, didn't like tiller steering, which was normal for Lanchesters of this early period. The car escaped Ireland with the family in 1923, being finally acquired for the Lanchester museum by the company that first made it, in or around 1924 in exchange for a more modern Lanchester.

Latterly, as he got rather stout, Audley found the tiller steering a little difficult, as you had to pull the tiller back to turn left, and there wasn't a lot of free room between the tiller, Granddad and the back of the seat...! The car itself survived until the Blitz, which destroyed the Lanchester collection along with much else. I understand that there is one identical surviving car in the Beauleigh Motor Museum. A spare from that original car survived until the demolition of the Hanningfield coach house and stables in the nineteen eighties. There was throughout my childhood a rusty iron bed frame hung on the wall of the coach house. I later found out that this was not, in fact, a bed frame but an iron frame that supported a rudimentary screen for the driver of the Lanchester, who sat outside the main body of the car, out in the open. The screen protected the driver's legs from the worst of the weather. Like so much else at Hanningfield, it had been hung up as 'it might be useful' and then forgotten.

Apparently, the original car was replaced, after the family returned to England, with a Model 1910 Lanchester with more conventional steering arrangements. This was still a pretty advanced bit of engineering for its day and had some interesting features, including a form of pre-selector gearbox and clutch, and that reliable but unusual feature, the lamp wick carburetor (the instruction manual suggested that 'if dry, it should be primed with half a gallon of petrol...'). Starting the car (without of course an electric starter) was not something to be done 'wantonly or lightly', and certainly not if you had just parked up for a moment, to nip out to the shops. Desmond could remember such an occasion in the middle of Chelmsford, when Granddad had left the car, on a slight down-hill slope, with the engine running and reverse gear selected. As with a modern automatic on tickover, the theory was that it would not move enough to 'challenge the handbrake'. However, on this occasion, the Lancaster, with my aunt Paddy and my dad on board, began to creep steadily backwards, up-hill and granddad nowhere to be seen...fortunately a public-spirited passer-by realized what was happening, and managed to get the car out of gear, and applied the handbrake rather more firmly! I have no record of my grandfather's reaction when he returned.....

Audley was, as far as I can tell, keen on fishing and field sports. When he 'retired' as a married man to the Deanery at Achonry, near Tubercurry, County Sligo, he lived the life of a gentleman clergyman and farmer, with access to good fishing and shooting. He seems to have kept cattle, and my brother Martin has photographs of Achonry with a row of grandad's beehives somewhere in the garden. What gives me some pleasure, even after all these years, is that after all the worry and upheaval of the departure from Southern Ireland during the Civil War, he eventually established the same sort of life at Hanningfield, with farm animals, bee keeping and winemaking as part of the civilized life of a Church of England clergyman. He set up a sort of fishing lodge at Steeple Stone on the Blackwater Estuary, and we suspect the shotgun came out of storage from time to time as well.



**1925:** *Bottom right: The old open-topped London bus acquired by grandad to be his Steeple Stone 'fishing lodge', parked outside the rectory 'parish room' (originally the coal shed for the rectory in 1863, and later our motor cycle garage) This photograph was taken from the kitchen window of the top floor nursery.*

There is a story that he objected to a heron that regularly fished in the pond in the front garden at Hanningfield. Whether he objected to herons, or objected to them clearing *his* fish from the pond, he was moved to fire a 12 bore at the heron from the bedroom window. History doesn't relate if the heron survived. On a gentler note, in the mid 1960's, I found an earthenware 5 gallon jar under a stone bench in the cellar at Hanningfield, still sealed and full of blackberry wine. According to Desmond, this could only have been made by my grandfather somewhere around 1936 or 37, as granddad was also a noted

wine maker among his other hobbies. Photographs of Hanningfield 'between the wars' show a number of farm animals, which may have been pets as well as the donkeys, which rather suggest a happier atmosphere after the trauma of Ireland. The fishing continued as well. AAO bought an old open top double decker bus of wartime vintage, simply to use as a fishing lodge at Steeple Stone, his favourite fishing spot on the Blackwater Estuary. I have a copy of a photograph of the bus standing in the back yard at the Rectory, before it went off to its final resting place at Steeple Stone. He must have been a very determined man, who was loyal to friends and family, and was clearly well regarded in the wider family, who supported him when times got tough, as they certainly did during and after the First World War. He ran Hanningfield Rectory as a 'hobby farm' in some style, with gardeners and a maid for Paddy. The maid is shown here with the family dogs, photographed on the front lawn, perhaps around 1930.



**1930:** *Paddy's maid, with the family's dogs, on the front lawn.*

The other family tradition, which I heard from Beth, was that Desmond wanted to go to medical school (one of the Dollar aunts was an eye surgeon, and his mother's father had been an equine vet,) so I believe that came from his mother's side. However, Audley Alfred would only support him if he studied for the Church. It does, however, go some way to explaining Desmond's style of churchmanship, which was nothing if not relaxed, from my point of view.

I have some personal items of his in my possession. There is a large majolica plate, depicting the visit of the Magi. There is his bible – much-thumbed, with a soft black leather cover. The fly leaf is stamped 'The Rectory, Dunmore. Co. Galway' and inscribed 'Audley A. Ost, July 1909', by which I assume that it was bought by him during his time in his first parish in Ireland. It is an Oxford University Press edition, of the sort which included a wealth of archeological and literary references, with lists of antiquities, 'modern discoveries', maps of the Bible lands, copies of temple reliefs from Egypt and examples of

pages from the earliest Greek gospel to survive, the Codex Sinaiticus and other Biblical sources. There is his clock, an American Ansonia wooden cased mantle clock, described as the 'Minster' clock, from Watts and Co, of Stonehouse Gloucestershire, with the words 'Canon Ost' written in ink on the inside of the case door.

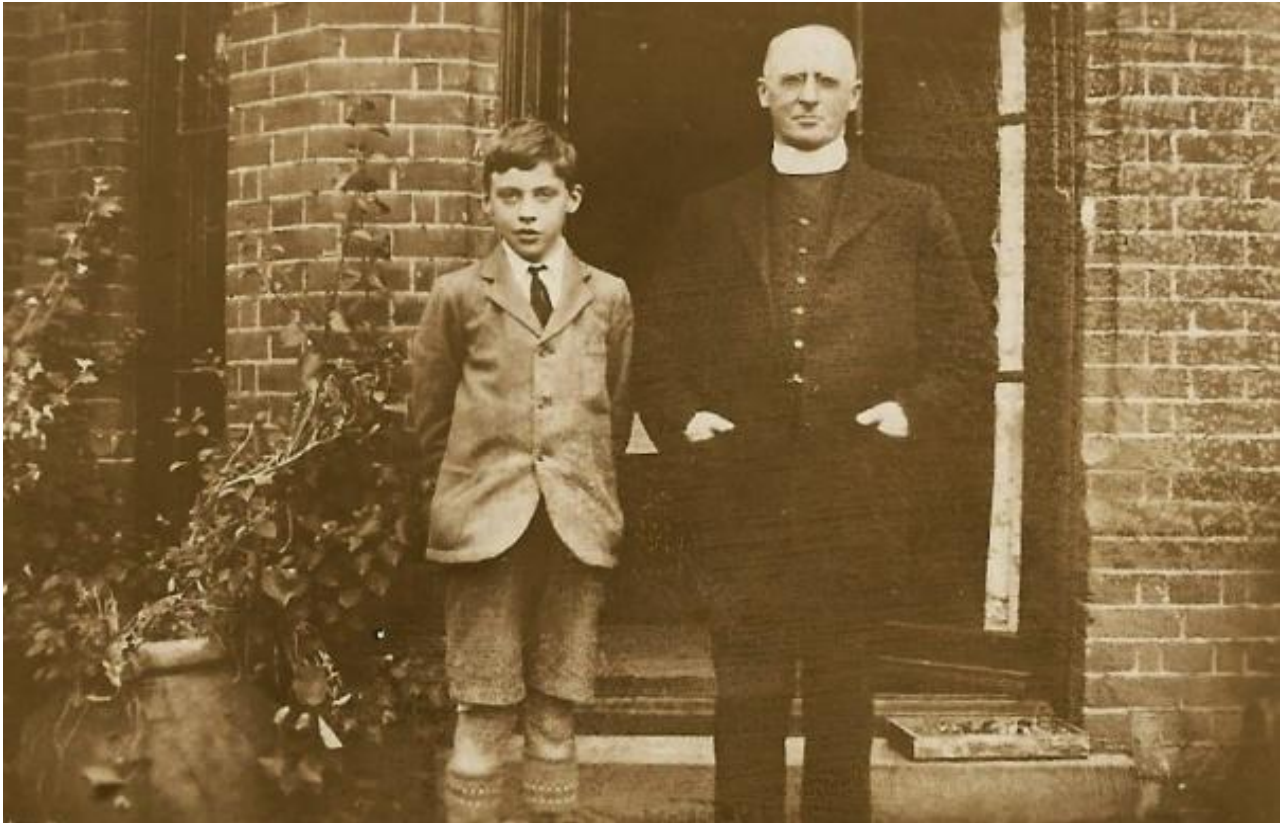
This used to reside on a shelf in the 'telephone room' at Hanningfield. It apparently hadn't run properly for years, and I was told as much when I tried unsuccessfully to make it go when I was at home.

It was in my parent's retirement house in Ingatestone, Essex when my mother moved house and gave it to me, along with the large majolica plate that had belonged to Dad's parents. I kept the clock in storage for many years, intending to get it fixed, but when I built a new cupboard in the office here, Judith suggested that the clock would make a good ornament for the space. As soon as it was put on the shelf it began to run, keeping good time ever since! I think all it had ever needed was a shelf that was accurately level in both directions....

The 'large plate' previously mentioned is in the style of Italian 15<sup>th</sup> Century earthenware plates, but we think this one is probably a Victorian copy. It purports to show the visit of the Three Wise Men, and appears to be a curiously poor copy of a Durer original print. I enjoy it very much for its unintended humour - the artist, whatever the original intention, so deformed the original as to make it very entertaining indeed, with the Wise Men travelling on some very strange animals, all out of proportion, huge bodies with 'rocking horse' heads stuck on (one I think has an odd number of legs), accompanied by a bear (or is it a massive hound derived from an appalling canine accident?) and the obligatory 'angelic host' look more like naughty ladies out on a hen night than members of St Peter's fan club. I love it, but I suspect it was originally a wedding present for Alfred and Christiana which they had to keep on display for fear of offending some relative or other! It was still on display in the best room in the house throughout my childhood. It is possible, of course, that my grandparents also found it amusing, but the Audley Alfred Ost in the vestry portrait does not look like someone easily amused or of a frivolous disposition. Certainly, I never heard my Granny Ost laugh.

All this is good but doesn't take us (apart from the Bible) much closer to the man. I felt I had achieved that, when I had a slightly surreal moment at the Essex County Records office while researching this book. While looking through an East Hanningfield parish register, I thought I had seen my father's very characteristic hieroglyphic signature, when I realized that I was looking at my grandfather's, not my father's, signature. Through some bizarre quirk, both men had very similar handwriting, and I felt I had found a link between us all, as my handwriting is also famously indecipherable, even to me!

I certainly didn't wait quite so long to get married as my granddad, and it almost seems like the start of a form of planned retirement for him. I think he was brave to leave it until he was past 50 to start a family, but she was the right lady for him, and he was setting up home in a part of Ireland he knew well, where the fishing (and possibly the shooting) was good, and he had family not many miles away, where there was an acceptable living and good chance of promotion within the Church of Ireland. He was now supremely qualified, reliable, experienced, and with private means as well. What could possibly go wrong?



*1925: My father (Audley Desmond Ost) aged 12, with my grandfather (Audley Alfred Ost) aged 64. Settled as last, a long way from armed conflict in Ireland,, in front of a bay window at East Hanningfield Rectory.*

Grandad's elder sister Ellen had also travelled with him for to Guyana, as family tradition has it that she kept house for him there during his ten years abroad, and returned with him to Ireland, and had her own house not far from Achonry, once he had married and set up home in the Deanery there. She also left Ireland with the rest of the family in 1922 to escape the civil war, and lived with Alfred and Christina at East Hanningfield Rectory, until her death there in 1927. She is the first occupant of the family grave at the east end of All Saints East Hanningfield, but was joined by her brother in 1939, her sister-in-law, my grandmother in 1960, my father in 1984 and my mother in 2008, the last two being interment of ashes rather than inhumation.

My father was born in 1913, when the likelihood of a war in Europe with the Kaiser's Germany looked more and more inevitable, and the rumblings of discontent over Home Rule for Ireland were getting louder. The war must have seemed a long way away, when it started in 1914, for a man doubly disqualified by age and employment for war service, although of course two of his brothers were serving in the Navy at this time, so he must have felt himself well out of it. Family life carried on, and my aunt Paddy was born in 1915. I cannot imagine that anyone seriously imagined that there would be rebellion in Ireland itself by Easter the next year, but the calm tenor of life in Achonry Deanery was certainly disturbed by the events in Dublin. Republican, Nationalist and Loyalist groups armed themselves elsewhere in Ireland, and organizations seen as leaning towards the authorities in England (such as rural outposts of the Anglican Church of Ireland) were fair game for the revolutionaries who were, in the main, Catholic. The Church of Ireland was resented as it raised tithes on the local population, to support

a minority religion. The Church of Ireland also maintained all the parish records, irrespective of religious affiliation. For these reasons the institution of the Church was resented and if the local incumbent was insensitive, there were the makings of big problems. The IRA attempted to destroy the Records Office in 1922 hoping to break the hold that they saw the Church of Ireland had over their countrymen. *(This attempt, which destroyed a significant part of the provinces records in Belfast at that time, has ultimately been frustrated as some copies of records remain in Dublin, but also by volunteers who have copied and recorded, over the last few years, the individual parish records, those of the Church of Ireland and of the Roman Catholic diocese, to rebuild a great part of the original records.)*

In reality, the situation, as with all rebellions, was far more complex than simply a Protestant / Catholic division. Families were divided in the South and even in the Six Counties, and only the foolhardy could be confident of a good outcome.

Several family stories come from this time. The first was an attempted raid on the house in Achonry – granny was ill and the raiders were repelled when granddad shouted at them that there was ‘fever in the house’. According to Dad, the headquarters for each faction in the troubles were well known to the locals, and in Tobercurry, Army and Republican H.Q.’s were but a street away from each other. Alfred made the not unreasonable assumption that ‘his raiders’ were Fenian revolutionaries, so went to the Republican HQ to complain that he had no axe to grind with either camp, he was a local man, born and brought up not far away, with family at home and relatives in the locality. ‘I have no quarrel with you boys –leave my family in peace’. He was told ‘Those troublemakers are nothing to do with us, Father, and of course we know you. If they bother you again, you have our blessing to shoot them’ whereupon he was handed a loaded revolver and thanked for his trouble!

It all got much worse after the war in 1922, following the secession of the six counties in the north, when civil war broke out, with fighting in Cork and elsewhere, with brothers involved in reprisals against brothers. Desmond remembered going out in the car with Audley Alfred one morning, only to come across one of their neighbours hanged by the side of the road, a formative experience for a nine-year old lad. *(The story in the family was that the killing was the work of the ‘Black and Tans’, a paramilitary police unit, recruited from the dregs of the British Army, with the same attitude to ‘Irish nationalist sympathisers’ as do the current members of the UDA / UVF who still trouble Northern Ireland today, along with their partners in violence and abuse, the various factions of the IRA.)* Family history simply records the neighbours who were killed, as good friends to Alfred and Christina.

Audley took the view that despite all his links to this part of Ireland, and to his wider family on Achill Island and elsewhere, this was no place to raise a young family, and the cross-country routes to the usual Dublin – Holyhead ferry being too dangerous for a family with clear English allegiances to risk, he took the family north into what is now Northern Ireland. At the border (I suspect Christiana and the children went ahead to go by train to Belfast) my Aunt Paddy came across a squad of the ‘Black and Tans’ (the militia formed of ex-British Army soldiers) forming a guard at the railway station. Paddy was seven, but whatever happened on that station, it was burned into her memory and she was still talking about the Black and Tans strutting about on the station a few days before she died. I suspect she had heard enough about this unit, and what it got up to, to be very scared by seeing them in the flesh. No doubt as

a young lady essentially brought up as an Irish country girl, she saw them as foreign, violent and an immediate threat to her and her family, and so they were.

I don't know what strings Audley managed to pull at this stage, but he was looking at any jobs going, so long as they weren't in Ireland. Another family story said that he had applied to be the chaplain for Sir Oswald Mosley, but that another rectory living became available about the same time in the Midlands, which, fortunately in many respects, suited Granddad better. And so it was that the Ost family escaped from the perils of post-revolutionary Ireland into the calm and obscurity of a living at Avon Dassett in Warwickshire.

The Dollar family now rode to the rescue again. At some stage in the preceding years, they had bought the 'Right of Presentment' to the living at East Hanningfield, in Essex. I have absolutely no idea how or why this purchase had been made. I can only think that there had been some plan whilst Audley was in South America that he would return from his mission work at some stage and would require to be 'found a place'. Why East Hanningfield was chosen, I have no idea, except that the presentment may have fallen vacant around the turn of the century. Now, in 1923, there was a short-term incumbent at Hanningfield, following the ill-health retirement of the previous rector, Joseph Sacre, but I have not yet found out when, or why, the Dollars made their investment. They used it to install Alfred, and they retained it to install Desmond in 1944, a few years after Alfred's death in 1939. We Osts have much to thank the Dollars for, as without their help Alfred would have been in deep trouble. Not all of us have the resources to survive being made a refugee, to have escape from real dangers in one country and set up home in another, at the age of 61, as my grandfather managed to do.

Granny was apparently overawed at the size of the 'pleasure gardens' and more likely by the financial implications of their upkeep. However, they seemed to cope. I have seen photographs from this period, showing that Paddy and Desmond had cattle and a donkey to look after, and probably cats as well!



*1927: Grandad aged 66 at sister Ellen's grave. Ellen (or 'Nell') was the first interment in the family plot. He is carrying his camera, with the Rectory visible in the distance behind him.*



*1927: A later photo of the Ost and Dollar families, at Ellen's grave.*

I have earlier included a photograph of Paddy's maid with three dogs on the front lawn of the Rectory, although you could have lost a complete hunt kennels in a corner of the plot! The donkey had a place in my childhood as well, since by a roundabout route, long since forgotten, his skull graced one of the shelves on a dresser in the back kitchen. The skull disappeared around about the time a real donkey appeared again at Hanningfield, of which more later.

I still have some photographs taken by grandad, several after a snowfall in the village. The best of these, the Rectory gardens after snow, shows the 'specimen trees' by the pond; the middle tree, the Chilean Pine or 'Monkey Puzzle' was actually listed by Kew as an outstanding specimen, as it has branches right down to ground level, as seen here in 1925 or '26.



**1925?** *East Hanningfield Rectory gardens after winter snowfall, a picture taken by my grandfather.*

The flat area, behind the big trees, and in front of the avenue of elms, was laid out as a tennis court when the game became popular in the late Victorian era. The three specimen trees, planted next to the new pond in the 1860's, are now well grown. In the case of the Wellingtonia on the left of the picture, it was not of course 'fully grown', but eventually reached 115 feet just before it was struck by lightning in 1978. All these trees are gone now, with the redevelopment of the house and garden in the 1980's. The picture seems to have been taken from the window of the second big bedroom on the first floor.

## Chapter 7

### Primary Schooldays

**Martin and I started our school days** at the Church of England primary school in Church Lane Hanningfield, about 300 yards walk from home. Mr Allen had a small farm next to our bottom gate, and I have a happy memory in a lift to school in the his cart – horse drawn of course – I cannot have been much more than four years old I guess.

Dad as Rector was chair of governors for the school, as the church authorities were still very much responsible for the running of the school in those days. The school had been built about a hundred years before, possibly as an act of charity by Rev Buxton-Smyth. There was a large entrance porch, one side of which served as a cloakroom, and the other led to a side room where the 'reception class' was taught. Inside, facing the main front door was another door that led to the two main class rooms, both under the same high ceiling but separated by a glazed wooden screen wall. Next to the last classroom was a small room which served as the school office, and which connected to the headmaster's house. Apart from the headmaster and his wife, I believe there were two unmarried women teachers, one of whom lodged with us at the Rectory.

The headmaster at this time was a Mr Bezant. He was appointed to the school a year or so after the end of the war, and obviously had quite a job on his hands, as all his pupils had been used to operating 'under war time conditions', with no fathers around, lots of interesting distractions and irregular school attendance. Childhood diseases were rife, with school closures necessary for outbreaks of scarlet fever and the like. One very strong childhood memory is that my father, and the headmaster, did not get on. I think that they were like chalk and cheese, with my father regarding him as both violent and pompous. Although he appears in the school record as assisting the school in practical matters, for example appearing with a blow lamp to unfreeze the plumbing in the outside toilets, and attending Harvest Festival celebrations and the like, it is clear that Desmond was not a regular visitor and one suspects a strong dislike of the headmaster, appointed by the County Council, was at least partly to blame.



*East Hanningfield Church of England Primary School, in around 1920. Built in 1863, this building was essential unaltered at the time Martin and I enrolled in the early 1950's. It is now a private house.*

**East Hanningfield C of E Primary school: the cane and the fiery locksmith**

Reading the school logbook, it is possible to gain a flavour of the man from his writing. Clearly from the record he was a man who did not spare the lash, despite the age of his pupils. There is the record of his disgust at the formal complaints made about this, by the local President of the Mothers Union. He clearly had the usual range of vulnerable and disruptive pupils, but his method was to patronize the former (after first having them subjected to IQ tests) and to soundly thrash the latter at each transgression. Things got so bad that two older lads, with younger brothers who had been beaten, took matters into their own hands, and packed the lock of the school front door with black powder, knocked on the door and then ignited the device when he could be heard trying to open it from the other side. He was shocked but not (apparently) physically injured by the blast, which blew out the massive lock plates and split that part of the very thick pine door.

The outcome of the incident was instructive and illustrates the local view of this man, especially as the whole thing is described in his own words, and he condemned himself very effectively in his logbook. (Judging by his comments on the young women teachers who worked with him, it is not at all clear that he meant the logbook to be read by anyone else). Obviously, the police were involved, and the miscreants apprehended very quickly. The headmaster called for the strongest possible response to this outrage, and my father, as chair of governors, initiated a prosecution before the local magistrate. Things didn't really go according to his plan, as the magistrate, hearing the boy's evidence, suggested that an appropriate sanction was for the boys (or the parents) simply to pay for half the cost of repairing the school door.

Mr Bezant was outraged, and his comments in the school log suggest that he felt his professional reputation had been besmirched by this failure to support an upstanding member of the community. I think he was hoping for the boys to get birched, if not imprisoned and, by winning this open and shut case, to put all his local critics in *their* place, once and for all. No doubt he held my father partly or wholly to blame for the failure (as he clearly saw it) of the case; I suspect Desmond felt the man only had himself to blame. It is interesting that the magistrate clearly shared my father's view. The result was that this outstanding teacher then revenged himself by beating my brother for a minor misdemeanor (he had been refused leave to visit the toilet and had been beaten for then wetting himself) I remember Martin returning home in floods of tears.

**Respite in Victoria Drive**

That was the final straw, and my father removed both of us from the school, and until the time this martinet got employment elsewhere, Martin and I attended the Cathedral primary school in Victoria Road, Chelmsford, where the head teacher was, by contrast, an honourable and distinguished soldier, decorated for valor at Vimy Ridge in the First World War, but too old to serve his country as a soldier second time around. I remember this as a much happier time. Oddly enough, I can't remember how I got to Chelmsford every day, although I do remember walking down Waterhouse Lane, past the walled garden of the Bishop of Chelmsford's residence, turning left at the bottom of the lane, opposite the entrance to the swimming baths, and along a footpath that ran along the edge of the Chelmer water meadows, behind the back wall of the Bishop's garden. The steps to the school playground led up from

this path, and I recall that on one or two occasions the path got flooded and frozen over. The school was on flat ground raised four or five feet above the level of the water meadows, so the school was OK. The playground retained an old bomb shelter, together with the thick brick blast wall in front of the main entrance. The older kids could lean against the shelter wall, and brace their feet against the blast wall, and climb to the top of the shelter that way. My memory was that I was too short (or too scared) to 'bridge the gap' and make the climb. Of course, we 'weren't supposed to do it' which was all the more encouragement to get bruised knees and elbows in the attempt! An elderly lady called Mrs Botell was our form teacher for the duration of my time at the Cathedral School, and I have only got happy memories of her teaching.

I do recall, and Martin may also remember, that Dad replaced the Panther towards the end of this time. On some days Dad would pick us up from school and collect us from Victoria Road. I have a very clear recollection of waiting on Victoria Road, outside the school, and being able to hear Dad when he was some distance away, as the engine note of the Square Four was very distinctive, so it was easily heard among the other traffic noise. I found that very reassuring.

### **Back to Hanningfield C of E Primary (under new management)**

**Mr Dewison** fortunately replaced Bezant fairly quickly, and the school logbook reveals his relief at moving on. Whether his new position was as trying as Hanningfield is not recorded. Desmond and the new head clearly had a much more positive relationship, although I was less happy. I've never been a 'games and outdoor sports' person, and there wasn't much else on offer outside the classroom. I was rather introverted, bookish, short sighted and probably on the tubby side – not a particularly endearing child, in contrast to my brother, who was and probably still is, much more outgoing. I was not punished physically, but I was subject to a fair amount of mockery and sarcasm from other pupils and the head teacher, which made for an uncomfortable couple of years. My final primary head teacher was Mr Williamson, who I remember as being a much easier character, and without the sort of sarcastic edge that mired my time with the previous head teacher.

One happy memory from this time was the summer school camp, a real innovation, as many of my peers may not have been outside the parish very often. We all were bussed off to Mersea Island in the Blackwater Estuary, and camped out on a large field on the eastern side of the island, close to the shoreline. It being the Blackwater, there wasn't a beach as such, but just below the high tide mark, next to the mud, there was a shallow concrete basin, filled at each high tide and which could be allowed to drain at low tide if required. Between tides it held enough seawater for gentle swimming. This was a small version of an installation which in the 1950's and 60's were quite common around the Essex estuaries and allowed a basic swimming pool, of sorts, at minimal cost and complication.

My memory was of an idyllic week spent playing ball games and going on local visits by boat or bus and sleeping under canvas through a warm summer week. Apart from a brush with a jellyfish that had found its way into the swimming pool, this must count as my happiest time in my primary years. I seem to remember we also had a close encounter with the incoming tide on our way home, as we were late leaving and the road connection with the 'mainland' is covered at high tide, as with all the other islands in the estuary.

Good times, at last.

It must have been about this time (certainly during my primary schooldays) that I had got into the habit of taking my 'night time cup of cocoa' with me when I went up to bed. This particular evening I got into bed, and obviously fell asleep before I drank the cocoa. In the morning, I thought, I know the drinks cold but I'm sure it's OK. However, it seemed that a small feather had escaped from my eiderdown quilt and settled on the surface of the cold cocoa, so I picked it off – unfortunately, it wasn't a feather but a mouse's ear, with the rest of the drowned mouse attached. My screams apparently woke everyone else....I knew we had mice in the house, because you could hear them scuffling about behind the paneling in Dad's study. I just didn't expect them to be trying my cocoa!

There were other changes as well, which I'm sure made a very big difference to the feel of the establishment. My mother, now that we had grown a little, took up her first job in education as the school secretary for the primary school. The extra money was very welcome, as although Dad had found temporary work at Marconi in Chelmsford, this does not appear to have worked out as he intended as he had never really had the experience of this sort of regular 'clock on, clock off' work in life before. Marconi did however provide a number of tenants for some of the spare rooms at the Rectory, and my memory is that in addition to providing homes for one or two of the young women teachers at Hanningfield, we found room for two Marconi engineers as well, who were very good with Martin and I. They helped us make and fly model aircraft, and encouraged us to perfect our marksmanship with their Webley air pistols from the front bedroom windows, using the heads of the bulrushes in the pond (about 40 yards away) as targets. If you managed to hit one of these, you got a spectacular burst of white fluff, and the near misses were registered with a splash as the bullet hit the pond. Bulrushes remained a popular target in that pond for many years!

*(Just as an aside; the title of this book is, I'm afraid, based on head master Ted Dewison's comment on me, when at some point, my behavior had yet again failed to come up to his expectations of a 'reliable sporty school boy, or a son of the manse'– what exactly I had done, I can't remember, but I know that I didn't stand high in his estimate to begin with. I would have minded less had the remark not been made in front of the whole class....Are schooldays 'the best days of our life'? I'll leave the reader to decide, but mine, I felt, had a number of low points for no particular fault of my own.)*

## Chapter 8

### Secondary Schooldays

#### **Sandon Secondary Modern: Barges, boats and bicycles (and the odd explosion)**

I was of the generation that was condemned to sit the 11Plus, almost everywhere, to determine if we were worthy of a 'grammar school education'. Some people still slaver after this strange ritual as the gold standard for their children. Their children on mature reflection may beg to differ on the benefit.

My brother Martin also sat, and failed the 11 Plus, and like me three years later, he went on to our local secondary modern at Sandon. He also sat and passed the 13 Plus, in his case going onto King Edward VI Grammar in Chelmsford. I followed him, as another 11 Plus failure, into Sandon, but in my case, after sitting and passing at 13 Plus, was sent to the newly opened grammar school in Rayleigh, Swayne.

It is questionable, I would humbly suggest, as to whether all my parent's aspirations and worries were justified, and as a means of filtering out the best talents, the 11 plus was (and is, in my opinion) simply a waste of time. Worse, it stigmatises children as 'failures' at a time when there are a huge amount of changes and potential uncertainties going on in their lives. Having a 'second best' tag as well is significantly unhelpful. And having a pass at 13 Plus, in my time, and in my experience, simply marked you down as 'second rate' in the eyes of many grammar school administrators. Certainly, given its catchment, Swayne appeared to underperform academically, and even the brightest seemed not to have reached their expected potential.

All kids develop confidence and life skills at their own pace, whether or not their parents recognise this, and the 'Grammar School badge' on the pocket is no sure indicator of later success in life. I would guess that there are as many millionaires (if that is any real indicator) from either side of the exam catchment – you just see a few very selective individuals being quoted to justify the prejudices of the speaker. I'm not sure, in short, that either educational path added value, or really fitted us for the world of work. I'm sure Martin could speak for himself and may differ from me on this, but I know that neither of us, I believe, would be consider ourselves to be 'academics' or 'high-flyers'.

I'm not sure that either of us received an education from our schools that achieved decent exam grades or really gave us confidence that we knew what we were doing. Essentially we were both in our different ways practical people, who would have done just as well, or better, from a decent vocational / technical education. Certainly neither of us burdened our parents with funding our further education, although I'm sure we imposed other burdens. I don't recall complaints from Desmond or Dora on the subject, but I know Dora was relieved and possibly quite pleased when I moved out, aged twenty-two, to start married life in far-off Sussex. I was not her favourite child, and I'm sure she felt she had had quite enough of raising children and noisy teenage boys!

At Sandon Secondary Modern, (near Great Baddow), however, I had the advantage of knowing some of the teaching staff (who were friends of Dora through a local choir) and knowing some of my peers from the village. Most of my friends were not village acquaintances but classmates from Chelmsford or Great Baddow. I had the advantage that most of them were within cycling distance from home, so it was

possible to meet up at weekends without dragging out Dad as transport manager. I got involved in all sorts of practical stuff, helping with school plays (not, however, acting) and I ended up at some school performance, singing a solo in front of school and parents. Given how dreadful my singing is now, I still can't believe I really managed that! Again, for reasons which I can't fully explain, I and my classmates spent many happy weeks constructing a dragon for some performance or other, from old barrel hoops (ribs) wire netting and monumental quantities of papier-mâché. He (I think it was a 'he') was a very gaudy chap, sporting 60W lamps as eyes. I think he went on display at a parents evening, eventually, but was spirited away by some of the older kids, and when I came to school next day, there was our dragon sticking out of the second floor window overlooking the school entrance....I never did hear who was responsible for the 'dragon abuse'!

Discipline at Sandon was relaxed, with as far as I recall no conventional physical punishment, but lots of advice about the potential outcomes of our mischief, and was a direct result of the sensible and supportive regime of headteacher Arthur Harvey. This was in significant contrast to earlier times at primary school, or indeed my experience at Grammar School. For those who got into hot water at Sandon Secondary Modern (myself included) the ultimate sanction was to exercise the headmaster's Irish Wolf hounds around the school boundary and around the playing fields. This was not an idle threat, as the hounds could (and did) tow grown people behind them with ease, and even several small boys on one leash were not really much of a challenge. My memory was of a school with robust personal guidance, great support and freedom for all the pupils, and a sense of personally 'doing OK' as I was in the top set of the top class in both my years there. The troublemakers (or alleged troublemakers) were in the lower streams, but for all that we all seemed to get on very well. I look back on it as a happy time.

I also remember a fairly relaxed attitude on the part of our physics teacher about some of our investigations into explosive devices, and some advice on the best ingredients and methods of construction. One of my second-year friends went through quite an extensive series of trials with steel tubing, Jetex fuse and various combinations of weed killer, sugar and potassium permanganate. Each Monday our teacher would examine the shattered or singed remains for assessment, and offer advice on the next stage of the experiment. I had also, privately, in the fastnesses of the Rectory gardens, tried some of these ideas, but I had had very strict warnings about the sensitivity of sodium chlorate-based explosives, and concentrated on trying to produce black powder, not with any success, it had to be said, as milling the stuff was beyond my technical competence.

It should be said that none of the raw materials were difficult to obtain from chemists in the fifties and sixties, *especially if you could get a Rector to do the purchasing*. I believe all of us survived with sight, hearing and fingers intact, and I personally didn't run into any sort of bother about it, until I got into some serious experiments with the explosive power of acetylene / air mixtures, of which more later.

On a more peaceful note, some of my Chelmsford friends were into sailing, and so I got to know the locks of the Blackwater and Chelmer Navigation quite well, as the navigation was their route for moving their craft from Chelmsford out to Heybridge, Maldon and the tidal, muddy, slightly intimidating Blackwater Estuary, with its huge mudflats, islands, creeks and salt marshes, dotted, then as now, with the hulks of abandoned barges and other boats.

I hadn't realized that most of the navigation was easy cycling distance from home, via the networks of little lanes on the other side of Danbury. I still remember the slightly unsettling feeling of approaching the downstream gate of the lock from the towpath. Many of the locks had road bridges just downstream of the locks, and if you went along the towpath into the tunnel, all you could see was the outer face of the lock gates, spouting water through a series of leaks, giving a very uncomfortable sense of impending deluge at any moment.

Sailing and messing about in boats appealed, even if I couldn't spend much on my interest, but we eventually acquired a couple of canoes, one of which got fitted out with outriggers, lee boards and a lugsail. It was probably not the easiest craft to learn to sail, and it definitely required parental assistance to transport and launch. I quickly found that helping out with the Sailing Club at Sandon got me access to working with other boats at Maldon, with access to more interesting craft if we helped out on maintenance of rowing boats and dinghies. A season's assistance resulted in two days crewing on the wooden sailing barge **Memory**, based in Maldon. This was the real thing – sailing barges under way are incredibly impressive beasts, fast, designed for operation by a very small crew, but with a huge spread of canvas. Once we got well out into the Blackwater, we made ourselves very handy by pumping out the bilges, a more or less continuous job in any sort of sea, as **Memory** was an old and leaky ship! I am told that **Memory** has now joined the hulks somewhere out on the mudflats, as keeping a wooden hulled barge in good sound seaworthiness is far too expensive for most owners. It's a great shame, as I have fond memories of working on her, and sailing in her as a crew member.

I'm guessing that my teachers, seeing the grades I got, felt I should sit the 13 Plus, though it's fair to say I was less keen as I had a good set of friends there, and was reluctant to start all over again somewhere else.

I eventually passed at "13 plus", and, very much against my will, finally made it to a grammar school in line with parental wishes. I had made friends at Sandon and had tried my hand at all sorts of things I had never experienced before. I had fallen into various scrapes, been gently corrected and survived. I had won fights. I had come close to being drowned out on the mudflats of the Blackwater but had survived, thanks to my friends. I had helped to repair boats, I had worked with other folk to create carnival monsters, and I had song solos in public. I had cycled all over my locality and explored new places in and around Chelmsford with new friends, of both sexes. I was in the top class of the top stream in the school and was seen (I thought) as someone who was going to do well, in my own way. The academic achievement was less important than the all-round involvement in new activities and experiences.

I objected to leaving my friends, having made a difficult transition from primary to secondary school, making my place among strangers, I was being forced to do this again. As a case in point, I found I could not even easily keep contact with anyone at Sandon, as none of my village 'peers' were part of my social group (no mobile phones then) and I made the move as required, however I resigned myself at that point to being one of life's misfits.

**Sweyne Grammar / Technical : (rebellion in the company of good friends...)**

I **really** can't give a convincing explanation as to why I lost contact with my Sandon friends in the way I did, but casual communications were more difficult then, and in reality I was having to swim so hard in my new environment that I guess I had little time to follow up old contacts, and few enough means to do so. It still surprises me, looking back, and a trace of guilt remains, but the few good friends I made at Sweyne have stayed with me, although I'm not someone who cultivates lots of friends.

Sweyne 'Grammar / Technical school' was a culture shock, and I still find it an odd although formative experience, looking back.

It was yet another time of experiments in education, and Sweyne was a brave attempt to meet the demand for grammar school education in Essex, while paying lip service to the need to bolster engineering skills, as the UK, as ever, struggled to keep up with the technical education provided elsewhere in Europe. The school was flooded almost as soon it was built, about two to three years before I was inflicted on the place.

Starting there in the autumn of 1961, I found myself in the company of a brave band of male and female individualists / misfits, inserted awkwardly into the state system, two year later than the official process dictated. We had come from all over the Commonwealth, from Canada, from Pakistan and from false starts elsewhere. We were not welcome in a new school aiming for high standards, and already reeling from a delayed opening. The headmaster, Bowman, a music snob of the first order, and a patronizing pain in the arse, and his deputy, Miss Crystal, Oxford educated but very strange, had clearly both escaped from a much earlier concept of the education system, possibly from some previous geological era. How they must have hated the 'technical' part of their school's title. They had only one concept of worth and achievement in their student body, and that was a university education in the liberal arts. Anything else was simply failure and beyond their concept of value, and to have to put up with 'the results of the 13 plus' in their school was clearly shameful to their concept of their new school and its standards, and a most wicked imposition by the Essex County Council Education Department.

We, the misfits of 3R ('R' stood for remove, significantly), were kept together as a form group, perhaps to prevent our contagion spreading more widely in the school, and we regarded the senior management of the school with equal affection, and individually and severally we determined to live up to our reputation, make the best of our time there, and sod their snobbery and arrogance.

Unlike Sandon, all the thugs seemed to be concentrated in the 'A' and 'B' streams, and some of these folk I remember as seriously unpleasant and threatening. As I suspected, settling in took a little while, as there was some mutual suspicion within our group too. Having a 'churchy' background probably didn't help, but my first real contact was another outsider, James Fotheringham, a talented musician, very bright with a sardonic approach to life, and with an interest in visiting churches. He and I cycled around the Wickford area, looking at churches and letting ourselves in the ringing chambers and generally satisfying our curiosity. I don't ever remember asking permission to look around although I suspect we should have done! I believe he was unofficial organist for some of the local churches – certainly he was very welcome at Hanningfield and I have fond memories of him playing in Dad's church on a number

of occasions. Jim also introduced me to the joy of bus travel and the 'Red Rover' ticket. I can remember a really mad day in London, just getting on and off buses, more or less at random, just to see where we might end up. I seem to remember starting in Liverpool Street station and ending up at Kew Gardens, without any very clear idea of how we got there.

One of my other 3R buddies, Don Abbey and I eventually found common ground, and thereafter we seemed to spend all our spare time in each other's houses. Don was amazed at the untamed wilderness that was Hanningfield and immediately bonded with Desmond; I was amazed and slightly overawed by Don Senior, who seemed totally in command and unflappable, yet this big, gentle man made the most exquisite tiny model aircraft, and introduced me to the dubious joys of powered control line planes, which hobby kept both Dons building and flying.

We experimented with weird impossible powered aircraft, proved to each other that given sufficient power, a plank would fly as well as anything else, and drove some of the odd vehicles which littered Hanningfield, as you never needed to take them on the road. Martin and I were given an early MOT failure in the form of an elderly Austin Twelve – Don, Martin and I cut away the body so there was just a bonnet, floor pan and seats, with the carburetor gravity fed from a lawn mower petrol tank, hung from the remains of the windscreen. This was driven around the drives, up Thieves Walk, across the fields until all the leaf springs had irregular bends and twists in them. My driving was pretty poor, and I have a clear memory of Don joining me unexpectedly in the front (as he started the trip in the remaining back seat) when I failed to avoid a holly bush next to the path through Thieves Walk! The front leaf spring had another funny twist in it after that, too. A friend's Austin Seven could not be driven too roughly, since it was stored on site, and had to be given back with all its original bits still attached. However, it had running boards, and it was difficult not to do gangster imitations, (standing on the boards with one hand round the door pillar) while someone else drove it round the garden.

Finally, there was the Iron Horse, a two wheeled tractor, with a 600cc industrial single cylinder engine and the technical sophistication of a Chinese pogo stick. To give readers some idea of this creation, it was like a monstrously overgrown version of the two wheeled Howard cultivator used for smallholdings, which would have been a much better bet. Unfortunately, from a design development point of view, this beast represented an extremely early sketched idea that could perhaps be best described as 'Mk 0.1 rather than Mk 1.0'. In a less demanding world, it would have been rejected for possessing a number of extremely unsophisticated mechanical arrangements, not least individual wheel dog clutches worked by very long levers, an open gear box with an unguarded chain drive, and a power takeoff in permanent drive mode. With the choice of spiked wheels or rubber tyres – this mini tractor had ideas above its station, claiming to do all that its larger tractor brothers could do for less cost. It was designed to 'do all the things real tractors do' i.e. pull ploughs, harrows, trucks and power farm machinery, but with more hassle and a more pronounced risk factor for the operator.

Desmond had a vision of ploughing and farming some of the paddocks around the Rectory land, which, like one or two of his other schemes to do something useful with the acres at his disposal, were admirable in concept, if slightly impractical for someone whose farming expertise was, I think, theoretical rather than soundly practical. (Dad had tried pig farming, and rabbit farming, at various stages

along the way. I'm not sure the question 'why on earth are we doing this' was ever asked at quite the right point in the proceedings). Dora was wont to class all these ideas as "another of your father's enthusiasms", an early example of the use of the 'dismissive subjunctive' in their relationship, which usually indicated that Dora would have nothing to do with the 'good idea' being discussed at that moment and would not take any further part in what passed as planning on my father's part.

We had, over the years, a lot of fallen timber about the grounds, and a lot of rectory to heat. If we could harness the tractor to take over the labour of wood cutting (which Dad and Mum achieved up to that time, between them with the use of a huge two-man saw) then that would surely be an advantage. The cart and tractor could move the timber around the 'estate' and we could use available farm machinery to reduce the timber to 'burnable size'.

In our case, the sole piece of 'farm machinery' was an enormous open circular saw, with, from memory, a very solid blade about two feet in diameter, mounted on a very heavy steel bench. The idea was that you connected the power take off pulley on the side of the tractor and the pulley on the saw bench with a rather inflexible canvas and rubber belt, eight or nine foot in length and about three inches wide, which tensioned itself (more or less) under its own weight, provided you had the pulleys lined up properly. Once the engine was running (no mean feat in starting it at all, given that you had to start it by hand on petrol and then judge when it was running hot enough to tolerate being switched over to its 'proper' fuel, paraffin) one of the dog clutches was engaged to drive the tractor's pulley, and power the saw. If it engaged too quickly, or if the saw bearings were a bit stiff, or the pulleys weren't quite in line, the belt flew off. If you avoided being hit by the belt, you went back and adjusted the set-up, put it all back together and started again. Once running, the saw was very effective, but of course you had to bring the wood to the saw, then lift it to the height of the saw bench, which was very heavy labour, and potentially highly dangerous with a saw you couldn't easily stop. You were supposed to have one person on the tractor all the time someone was sawing, but this was more often ignored by 'single man bands' as many small farmers were then.

These saws were quite common on farms when I was little, and the ringing noise they made when cutting could be heard for a very long way; this was one of the characteristic 'sounds of cold, damp autumn days' in my childhood. You won't be surprised to know that when we really had a lot of wood to cut up (during the Dutch Elm disease peak) Dad gave up and bought a Swedish chainsaw!

The engine on the tractor was started by directly hand cranking the heavy flywheel, after 'tickling' the carburetor (holding the float down in the float chamber) to ensure a plentiful supply of petrol. I recall there was an exhaust valve lifter to let you crank past compression and build up the flywheel momentum, together with a device to 'short out' the magneto ignition, until the flywheel was 'up to speed'. As the timing of the magneto was fixed, it was unwise to activate the ignition at low engine speed as it would happily backfire, and it was a bit of an art to judge speed of cranking against the sequence of dropping the exhaust valve and switching in the magneto. (I had several nasty incidents during starting attempts, which if you were lucky threw the handle out of the starter cog, or in my case onto my leg which left me with a severe limp for a day or two) and there were many pitfalls / challenges in starting

and maneuvering this machine, especially with a large trailer tucked on behind. The only good thing was it did **not** have a reverse gear, which had caused unwary owners to have serious accidents.

## Chapter 9

## Cats, birds and beasts: Hanningfield's guardian spirits

**I could not** quite understand what my mother had against dogs. Having said that, I've no evidence that my father was that keen on dogs either, but Hanningfield was not short of space and it would have been (in my childish view) an ideal space for both dogs and small people to grow up together. I'm going to have to fall back on the strong suspicion that Dora was convinced that if there was a canine addition to the household, she would find herself walking, feeding said beast, and mopping up the accidents.

Her sisters in Acton owned a dog, Rex, who was famously incontinent and untrained. He lived in a species of cage-and-kennel, well away from the house, and indeed wasn't *allowed* in the house at all since a regrettable incident where he had set on, and devoured, the sisters underwear that had been left out to dry. While Martin and I were quite happy to walk Rex, so would have warmed to the idea of a dog ourselves, we were pretty clear that Dora was less than impressed with the idea of another incontinent dependent at Hanningfield, and yet another mouth to feed.

So, despite the evidence of dogs, farm animals and at least two donkeys at Hanningfield in the interwar years, cats were the sole animal 'companions' of our early childhood, in fact until one of my mother's friends introduced a dog to the household much later on.



1925? First Ost 'pets' at East Hanningfield, the donkeys 'Bob' and 'Jack'.



*Dogs, small*



*And large! Desmond and Paddy with Paddy's spaniel, outside the old vine house in the walled garden.*

The cats were a pretty mixed bunch, effectively feral and subsisting for the most part on the abundant rodents in and around the sheds, barn and stable. Early on, one black tom rejoicing in the name of 'Sooty', distinguished himself by supplementing his diet with beer. Alcoholic beverages being discouraged at home by Dora's ideal of temperance and the state of Desmond's finances, Sooty did the obvious thing and took himself off to the 'Three Horseshoes', an old-style country ale house just across the road from the rectory. This style of pub didn't have a cellar or beer pumps but did have a backroom at ground level with beer barrels on benches. Each barrel had a drip tray under the tap, and a nimble cat could easily hop onto the bench and lick all the drip trays dry – I'm not sure if the pub staff knew they had a freeloader, or if they just found the idea of Sooty's visits amusing. He was, by all accounts, a *very* regular visitor.

While the taproom was a very short way from the rectory garden, the return journey after the beery debauch was not quite so straightforward. Getting across the road was easy, as it was level, and there were few cars about. Crossing the ditch was OK as well, but getting up the bank, and through the hole in the hedge into the garden sometimes presented insuperable difficulties for a pissed tomcat, and he sometimes gave up the unequal struggle and slept off the effects in the ditch.



1949: Martin with 'Butch', one of the early cats!

Representing the female tribe, on the other hand, was a small, feisty, semi-wild grey cat, whose specialty was the consumption of cold boiled potato, whenever she could get it, and the destruction of moles. Her technique was to watch a mole infested lawn *very* carefully, and keep stock still, until she saw the slight

ripple in the turf as the mole patrolled the tunnel; 'Grey' would then spring mightily onto the moving patch of grass and rip the mole out of its burrow and kill it. This was clearly sport and not subsistence, as she would leave the mole corpses on the step outside the kitchen door, often two or three lined up together. Unfortunately, dead moles get very smelly very quickly, and there were a few complaints in warm weather until we remembered what she had been up to and disposed of the remains!

As I said, the cats were a mixed bunch who tended to choose us, rather than the other way around, but on one occasion we were given a pair of pretty, dark brown, irresistible kittens who were the result of a love match between a colour point Persian / Siamese queen and an old black tom. Both grew up to be very large cats, with an amazing vocal range, and as they were pedigree rejects, they were christened 'Flotsam' and 'Jetsam'. 'Jetsam' weighed in at about 15 pounds and was known to catch and kill rabbits. To encourage them, Desmond fed them on a diet of raw ox lights (lungs), which were cheap and readily available from dad's local butcher.

The cats loved the ox lights and would drag the floppy bloodstained lumps of offal away under the bushes with great glee. In their mind this disgusting material must have seemed like something they had killed themselves but everyone else (except Desmond) hated ox lights because they looked smelt and felt disgusting, the cats would constantly fight over the remains and the leftovers would putrefy very rapidly unless it was really cold.

The worst effect, however, was on their digestion. Flotsam and Jetsam were as near as possible house cats and had a 'special' piece of old towel on the end of one of the kitchen cupboards, where they liked to sit, survey the kitchen scene and generally rule the roost. Often the effort of jumping up onto the towel was enough to trigger the worst silent farts I have known from any creature on earth, which would result in them becoming 'outdoor cats' very rapidly indeed.

Flotsam was also extremely clumsy. Cats are usually good at jumping up onto things and balancing on narrow ledges and landing right way up if they fall. Not Flotsam. If he jumped onto a stack of bricks, he would knock bricks down. Walking on a tiled roof, he would step onto the leaded gully between the roofs and lose his footing, and slid, backwards, off the roof right over the gutter. He was not a 'lucky cat' and he wasn't with us for long, unfortunately.

Jetsam, by contrast, was many years with us, until he was a bit too quick to jump out onto a rabbit someone else (not me!) was in the act of shooting.....

Desmond acquired another female cat, this time tortoiseshell, by the simple expedient of running her over with his van but failing to kill her. The incident, fortunately for the cat, took place just outside the local vet's house – Phillip Mitchell was not only an excellent vet and equine vet, he was one of Dad's churchwardens, as well as being Master of the Essex Hunt at some stage and a genuinely nice guy. The cat had a broken pelvis, which was patched up, and the patient returned to our care, to recuperate in a cardboard box beside the Aga stove in the kitchen. Not a bad spot, it was warm day and night, and close to food and a litter tray. The recuperation was prolonged, and the cat was obviously recovering but very slowly as movement was clearly painful, and the short trips were taken with great, great, care. Until the

day when we had left the door ajar and returned quietly and unexpectedly to find a very lively cat jumping off the draining board – we had acquired an excellent actor!

Growing against the wall of the 'dining room' was an espalier trained pear tree, which was so well established that it went up some 60 feet, well above the gutter level of the top floor. It can be seen sticking up above the gutter line in several photographs of the house and garden. By the tree, in the corner, was a cast iron drain pipe which went up to the top gutter, but because of changes in the thickness of the wall, and the alignment with the top gutter, the 'vertical' pipe had a kink about five foot above the ground, and another one just below the gutter, fifty odd feet up.

We arrived one day to find a small group of cats sitting close to the open bottom of the drainpipe, obviously interested in something *in* the drainpipe, which was mewling and scratching inside the pipe. We could hear it trying to make its way up the pipe, mewling and slipping down at intervals. The assembled cats at the bottom were calling as well.

Flakes of rust and bits of dried material were dropping out of the bottom of the pipe, dislodged by the desperate efforts further up inside. At that time we had a litter of young kittens, who were in the 'exploring and climbing curtains phase', and it seemed that one of these young adventurers had gone exploring up the drain pipe, which was amply 'kitten-sized', and had got up beyond the first kink in the pipe, but now could not reverse out, nor climb past the bend up by the gutter. The scrabbling and mewling had been going on for twenty minutes or so.

Just as panic was beginning to set in, someone remembered that we had a ladder that could reach the gutters down in the stables. Martin, I think, climbed the ladder with the garden hose. Once Martin had the hose firmly in the top of the drainpipe, I turned the hose full on. There was a moments desperate scratching from inside the pipe, and then a flood of water and one very wet and bedraggled kitten shot out of the drainpipe, to be scooped up in a towel and firmly dried, none the worse.

The pear tree was the answer to another strange series of incidents involving another cat, sometime later. We kept finding the outside kitchen door swinging open, with nobody around and no obvious explanation. After some careful observation, we saw that one cat was amusing herself by climbing up the pear tree to gutter level. From there she would walk along the gutter to the other end of the house, where one of our lodgers left their bedroom window slightly open. Once inside, she would make her way down the backstairs, which led to the kitchen door. If that was closed, she had learnt to jump up and pull down the lever handle to open the door. Swinging the door open, she would be back up the pear tree for another series of 'circuit and bumps'. I'm sorry to say we spoiled her fun by reworking the door latch so it had to be lifted to open the door. I have no idea how Puss worked it all out in the first place, but she had us puzzled for quite some time.

Phillip Mitchell unintentionally supplied another distraction for us and the other inhabitants of the garden when one of his grateful clients supplied him with a pair of peacocks. However, the client hadn't clipped their flight feathers, and didn't tell Phillip either, with the result that they both quickly escaped into the wilderness that was the Rectory garden, to live the peacock equivalent of the life of Riley. They seemed to find plenty to eat, and there were no shortage of mature trees for them to roost in. A peacock

flying is an awesome sight as the tail is half spread, and they fly low and noisily, and a close encounter with a peacock in flight is bit like being buzzed by a small aircraft. As is well known, peacocks exude 'attitude' and seem to hold everything and everyone else in contempt. Our cats were all scared shitless by these noisy vicious feathered killing machines, and it was common experience to see one of the cats in full high-speed retreat, fluffed up and terrified, rushing past the window to be followed a few moments later by a peacock stalking steadily along, beak poised to strike. They were with us for several weeks until Phillip organized a posse to corner them somewhere, sort them out and take them home.

We also occasionally were invaded by cattle, escaping into the garden from the backfields which were rented out to a local farmer from time to time.

Just before I went up to secondary school, my appendix decided to turn septic and had to be removed in a hurry. As it was thought unwise for me to climb stairs during my recovery at home, Dora had a bed for me in a corner of the sitting room, where there was also a stove to keep the room warm. On my second morning home, I had the slightly surreal experience of opening the curtains to find a herd of bullocks staring in at me through the bay windows – another bovine invasion.

I think I know why we acquired our long-term set of residents at the Rectory; Dad had one of the more entertaining of his enthusiasms when he acquired a gander and one or two geese, somewhere in the late fifties. The idea was pretty sound. The geese could live happily on the home field, where there was unlimited grazing and there was a large pond at the end of the field, in case they needed a little security from foxes and other intruders.

We had previously kept a dozen Khaki Campbell ducks (presumably for the eggs and the table) in the garden, on the other side of the pond, where there had been a tennis court prewar.

We lost the whole lot to a fox one afternoon, and I guess someone had said, after that incident, that geese looked after themselves more effectively, and were also good for the table. I'm sure they are 'good for the table', but you had to know which ones were yearlings, and which ones were older, and unfortunately all the geese looked the same, which was why after all Dad's trouble in catching, dispatching, plucking and gutting one goose for Xmas we found ourselves eating what seemed like warm inner tube.

Goose eggs were also a theoretical possibility, but after one or two close encounters with enraged and very protective geese, the 'domestic input' from the geese was reduced to their guard duties on the home field. Nothing moved on those fields without our knowing something was amiss. Left to themselves, the gander and his girls did their duty and we ended up with about fourteen geese out there.

There were occasions when they got bored and trooped off to explore other parts of the establishment. These forays caused terror to our lodgers, especially Mrs Hooper, who I don't think was keen on birds of any size, and of course they sensed that and plagued her relentlessly whenever they invaded the garden and she was unwise enough to be outside. They do present quite an alarming sight, head down, neck outstretched, hissing and flapping, but they go very quiet if you grab their neck, which I had to do

once or twice. We found that if you grabbed one, the rest would behave themselves too! I suppose their most artful enterprise was finding their way the apple store in the stables, where heaps of apples had been carefully stacked between layers of straw, in the hopes they might keep a little longer. I think one or two were beginning to go soft and ferment, and the smell probably led to the geese working out where they were. We heard the hullabaloo from the house, and when we got there, there were geese rushing in and out of the stables, honking with delight, and doing their best to escape with apples. The trouble is that geese aren't really equipped to eat solid apples, and while they did alright on the rotten fruit, one or two had impaled apples on their beaks, and were running around in total panic with their beaks jammed into large apples. It made them very easy to catch, and if only we could have worked out which ones were young enough to be edible it would have been a useful exercise!

We never ever lost a bird to man or fox – in fact I suspect the foxes gave that field a very wide berth, given that you can't surprise a flock of that size day or night, and to say that they were inclined to be aggressive is an extreme understatement. The only thing they didn't like and couldn't cope with was freezing weather (that sealed their pond) or the hounds of the Essex Hunt.

Frozen ponds led them to leave their field and invade the garden. They would then line up outside the kitchen door like some sort of feathery mass lobby, or 'trick or treat' gang. One goose would then tap on the kitchen door, very persistently, until some kind soul brought them out several large buckets of warm water, to dabble in and throw over themselves and each other in what looked like kids at play.

The hounds of the Essex Hunt really had no business in our fields but barged in anyway. The geese panicked and took to the air (no mean feat if you are an ancient and obese gander who could only get airborne after running across the whole field). Flapping and honking furiously the flock would blunder through at head height or below to take refuge in a safer bit of the garden, while we went to have words with the whippers-in.

On one glorious occasion the whole flock exited the garden at head height and landed in the car park of the 'Three Horseshoes', where a number of the hunt followers had parked their cars. The gander distinguished himself by landing on the roof of a parked Jaguar, voiding the entire contents of his bowels on impact, and spreading the green and white gander shit in a thick splatter down the windscreen with his ample backside, before scratching the paintwork of the bonnet with his clawed feet as he slid off. Dad was not put off or worried about a claim for damages – 'clearly an act of God' was his comment, as he recovered old man gander and his wives from their landing site.

After I left home in 1969, Dad must have felt the need for extra male company. Dora was washing the front door and steps one day, when Desmond walked past her leading a very large donkey on a halter. The conversation on that occasion was not recorded, but Desmond's story was that this donkey (an entire jack) was about to be gelded as his behavior was causing some problems to his owner. Dad didn't approve of treating donkeys that way, and so he acquired Brutus and installed him in the paddock next to the home field as a sort of retirement home for Brutus, and as entertainment for Desmond. The official story was that Brutus had been mistreated by adults, and did not like adult men, but was OK

with kids. He was certainly OK with my children, who could climb all over him and comb him without complaint or incident. As to adult men, it didn't apply to all men as there was definitely a bonding between Desmond and Brutus. Dad would make a fuss of him, and Brutus for his part would call to Dad when he heard him walking about the garden. He would call to Desmond as he walked back into the garden from the church, long before anyone else was aware that dad had come back. The call, of course, was no music, but an incredible racket proceeded by a mechanical-sounding 'pumping up' before the braying actually started. Brutus was a character and was often to be seen tethered and grazing other wilder parts of the garden. If he didn't like most adult men (and he proved that on a number of occasions) then he totally detested cats. Donkeys when in their home range have one spot where they defecate and another, dry dusty spot where they love to get down and roll. My mother's friend's dog would haunt the dumping spot as it liked to eat donkey shit, then roll in it, and then rush indoors to see who it could lick or jump on, but the cats preferred the more socially acceptable delights of sleeping on the rolling patch, as it was always dry and in the sun. *Very bad move.*



*1972? A formal picture of Desmond's new friend, 'Brutus' the 'entire jack' donkey, who had a wicked sense of humour, and a 'bray' that could be heard over a good part of the village. He would wind himself up to start braying when he sensed my father walking up the drive from the church. He was touchy with adult men (except Desmond), but he was very tolerant of children. He hated cats (that always tried to take over his beloved 'rolling patch') and men wearing duffel coats, who were generally surveyors invading his field.*



*Brutus was much better behaved with women; Dora wasn't quite sure what to make of him when he first arrived, but he was soon part of the Rectory 'family'. Feeding him helped to make that bond!*

While Brutus was totally indifferent to coprophagous canines, cats on his rolling patch were a challenge, and a personal insult to his rule over his field, which required a positive response to restore his bruised honour. His next move was carefully worked out and fascinating to watch, once you realized what the old guy was up to. Brutus would begin to drift very, very slowly round his field, with no apparent destination in mind, grazing and stopping, grazing and watching, without disturbing the cat. When he was sure the cat was ignoring him, he would move quietly in, to get behind the sleeping moggie. While still exuding total disinterest in the cat, Brutus would inch closer and closer until he was close enough to suddenly spring into the air (with a surprising turn of speed and agility for a donkey) to flatten the cat under his hooves.

I'd seen the manoeuvre underway on several occasions, but each time the cat woke up in good time. The one time it nearly worked, the cat only woke as Brutus became airborne – the cat only just escaped, and never slept there again! Brutus played the same trick on unauthorized visitors to his field, especially those wearing duffel coats. We had an official complaint when the Rectory was being redeveloped and a team of surveyors were in the field – at least one surveyor ended up flat on his back, in the mud, with a duffel coat minus its hood and a very proud donkey!



*Brutus in heaven; his own field to himself, with no cats, and no surveyors in duffel coats!*

## Chapter 10

### Getting about – bikes and cars (or family transports of delight)

**I can't remember** not being able to ride a bicycle, but I guess I must have acquired the skill aged five or so. Nigel Ashley, 'the boy upstairs', had a tricycle, but the water-bound pebbly paths and drive were so rough that the trike wobbled about very alarmingly and was very difficult to steer. I must have shown some promise (or, more likely, I was far too large to go on anyone's bike seat) as Mum and Dad found a small single speed pushbike with an unusual shape of frame. For some reason it had been modelled on the folding bike used by parachute troops during the war, as the frame was made from two curved tubes side by side, giving an oval rather than a diamond frame. It *didn't* fold, which was probably a good thing, given the state of our paths....

Having acquired a measure of independence, so to speak, this meant that I could accompany the older members of the family when we went visiting, although 'keeping up' with a single speed bike was challenging, and probably pretty frustrating for the rest of the team. The Rectory gardens had a ready-made circuit, starting from the terrace, down through the shrubbery and onto the drive past the pond, back round the other shrubbery towards the front door, before taking a sharp left turn onto the terrace again.

Dad attempted to improve the paths around the garden by strewing the ash from the Aga over the more uneven bits. I can report that cinders are no more forgiving to land on than pebbles, as I had several hard landings without benefit of padding or helmet during my many circuits, and cinders were neither reliable when cornering hard, nor easy to get out of your mouth when you've landed face-first, as I did on at least one occasion.

Having acquired the scars of experience and (hopefully) some basic road sense, a longer circuit beckoned. Out of the top gate and onto the Chelmsford road towards Howe Green, then very sharp left onto Back Lane and past some farm entrances until another left turn took you up past the school towards the junction on the road to Rettendon. Left again took you along the Tye, past the 'Windmill' pub, past the road down to the shop and post office, past the church off to the right, and sharp left again just before the car park of the 'Three Horseshoes' into the bottom gate to the rectory gardens, a round trip of about a mile.

Hanningfield was not entirely without public transport, but it was limited to an hourly visit on weekdays by the No.11 bus. I believe this route is still served by the No. 11, so this route has been in existence for at least 70 years, and maybe a bit longer. It started in Chelmsford at the bus station, which in those days was located just on the over side of the railway bridge, next to the station. Whether it is still in the same place I have no idea, but I have certainly walked from the old bus station, back to the village, on my own, on at least a couple of occasions, when I was coming back from the swimming pool in Waterhouse lane, and found I was 'between buses' or without the fare to get home. Martin and I apparently, although I have no memory of it, caught the bus into Chelmsford on each school day, and then having got off somewhere near the cathedral in Chelmsford, we would both walk from there to the Cathedral primary school on Victoria Road, going via Waterhouse Lane to the back entrance of the school playground. I

suppose we must have returned home by bus as well, although latterly we were collected by Dad on the motorbike, when we would go onto Victoria Road to wait for the familiar engine note!

In the other direction, the final destination was Eastwood Road, or possibly Southend bus station. There was also the 11A, which bypassed Hanningfield and went directly from Rettendon Bell to Howe Green, which meant quite a long uphill trek from Rettendon Bell, to the village. If you needed to go anywhere else, you had to have some form of personal transport, bicycle, motorbike or car. I'm not sure that anyone we knew in the village had a car in those days, although there must have been several associated with the larger farms or grander houses. It was a very long way into my childhood before my parents could aspire to anything grander than a motorcycle and sidecar.

I've already mentioned the Panther and its sidecar, but this was more in the spirit of a three wheeled pickup truck, and it couldn't take the whole family. I remember cycling significant distances on summer days with Mum, Dad and Martin, often to the social meetings of the Essex Beekeepers Association, which Dad had belonged to, I believe, from the end of the war. One particular trip stands out as a pleasant memory, of cycling as a whole family across country to High Ongar. We cycled down Pan Lane, crossing the Rayleigh /Chelmsford main road and into West Hanningfield, then towards Stock, along the Lower Stock Road. Passing through Stock, we headed through the back lanes to Ingatestone. Cutting through Ingatestone, the road led to Blackmore and Nine Ashes before joining the A414 at High Ongar. Without going into great detail, that would be about 16-17 miles each way, I suppose a two-hour ride at my pace. I'm sure we must have taken that sort of length of ride on several occasions, although I suspect only in good weather. I also have a memory of going exploring with some of the other kids at that meeting, and of finding a sort of metal pillbox or turret, out in the countryside near Ongar. Dad thought it might have been a remnant of the WWII defence lines (antitank ditches and local strong points) which ringed London and which were gradually dismantled or forgotten in the early fifties.

Years later, I retraced parts of this route as my way to work, when I landed a job at May and Bakers outstation at Fyfield, out on the road to Leaden Roding from Chipping Ongar. This time it was a journey by car, not bike!

The other great cycling destination for us and our pals were the fords which ringed the base of Danbury (one just at the boundary of the parish near Bicknacre), or the masses of sand and gravel workings in and around the area. I don't remember asking permission to visit these places, but the attraction were the rough paths, ditches and banks which made up what would now be thought of as BMX courses! The bikes were definitely not made for that sort of terrain, and we had no protective gear or any way of summoning help if things went wrong. I don't remember any visits where injuries occurred (or were inflicted) which seems surprising looking back. There were deep, unfenced lakes where gravel had been extracted. The ford beds were always slimy and very, very slippery, and (from memory no-one tried riding through a ford twice), so why we didn't end up with bumps, bruises or broken limbs I can't imagine.

There's a photograph of Mum and Dad with their bikes, and a trailer for us, circa, I guess, 1949. Dad had the happy job of towing the trailer, and apparently this was the only means of visiting Acton in the late forties and I can't imagine this was a regular run, as Hanningfield to Acton is well over 30 miles or

about four hours without stops or steep hills (of which there are a few). My first visit that I remember (given that I was born there) was in or around 1953, by which time the Panther was on the scene. I seem to remember hired cars for winter journeys from time to time, probably at Dora's insistence.

After a long series of modifications to his beloved Aerial Square Four, Dad was motivated to try to update the beast by acquiring a later version with proper suspension, but his love of tinkering and modifications got the better of him. The brakes on these bikes were not brilliant, and the Aerial had grown so heavy with all Dad's additions of massive sidecars (and trailers), belt driven generators and the like, that the manual brakes were simply not up to the job. Disc brakes were not around, but the race bikes were sporting double, back to back, drum brakes for the front wheel, which seemed like a good idea. Dad had one of these monsters built for the new Aerial, but fitting it, and getting it to work was the 'bridge too far'.

Some kind soul offered him a massive black Morris 15cwt van and he never looked back. I think the thought of never having to be cold and wet while travelling (not to mention the massive unreliability of the motorbike) finally won out, and bikes were a thing of the past, for him. The 'Black Maria' served him well for some years, and I remember going on a camping holiday with Dad, and not breaking down, and actually going to where we planned to go, was a revelation.

It was too late for Dora, I'm afraid. A few experiences of unplanned motorcycle maintenance in remote and uncomfortable locations took its toll. Thereafter Dora and Desmond never holidayed together, Dora preferring to take us, by coach I think, to places like Lowestoft and stay in B&B or go off somewhere with Beth and Nancy.

I have a recollection of a very cold and damp holiday, the Easter of 1959, with Mum, Dad, Beth and Nancy in a chalet bungalow at Wroxham in the Norfolk Broads. I would have been about nine at the time, so 1959 or thereabouts. I can't recall how we travelled but it might well have been an early organised coach trip. I do remember finding the waterways, with the acres of reedy lakes, and derelict boats and hulks in odd places, very disturbing. The wooden bungalow was situated in a very damp, boggy garden, with its own little silted-up quay. Everywhere you went in the garden you were accompanied by small frogs, jumping in all directions. The whole place seemed on the point of disappearing under water at any moment, and I don't think anyone slept well.



*Aunt Nancy standing in the frog-infested, very wet lawn, looking towards the river behind the bungalow.*

I remember nightmares of being stuck at water level in the middle of one of the huge meres, under a cloudy sky towards evening, always evening. We later discovered that the last person who lived there had committed suicide in the property, which didn't surprise me very much. I think that was our last attempt to hold 'combined holidays' with both Mum and Dad. I think they both saw so much of each other in the normal way of things that 'holidays apart' made sense and gave them both a break, and actually they had very different interests.

Dad decided that a really good holiday was for him and I to go around eastern and southern England to visit all, (or at least as many as time allowed). of the 'Forts of the Saxon Shore', or as they are referred to now, the Roman Shore Forts. (It appears that no-one really knows quite why they were built, these days). This was the last outing, on holiday at least, of the final version of the Aerial Square Four, and we packed the side car with me and, as I recall, a two-man army surplus tent which were cheap and readily available. It was no fault of Desmond's that it rained most of the time, while we ranged from Burgh via Bradwell to Reculver and Richborough. I think the damp got to us before we made it to Pevensey or Porchester, and I regret not having had the chance to visit these with Dad as well. He never saw them, although I have since, and I always think, when I see them, of my father taking the time to show me the surviving bits of Roman architecture, an interest which has stayed with me, and taken me much further afield.

As we made our steady slow way back through North Kent to Gravesend, to get the ferry back into Essex, we passed a very large, very flooded house in a field in a valley below us. There was muddy water up to the first-floor windows and that image has stayed with me. I realised that a damp tent was preferable to that and thought how lucky we were to have got away with just that in such a dreadful wet summer. Even the motorbike behaved on that trip.

It has to be said that Dad still hankered after ancient modes of transport. None of his vehicles (until his Chevan, his last and best vehicle) were new, and until the Chevan, none were really reliable in the way we have come to expect vehicles to be. Until his last vehicle, most of Desmond's vans could be spotted easily as ancient and rusty. Even the otherwise excellent ex-butchers diesel van, with a sealed cab (so no bees could annoy you), and lined with aluminum checker plate, had been fitted with a very poor quality reconditioned engine, and so didn't give the reliable service that it should have done.

Dora, as with much else, showed the way. As soon as she got a teaching job, she bought a new and very reliable car and changed them well ahead of the usual state of dereliction that was Desmond's preferred vehicle condition. It gradually dawned on Dad that you spent less in the long run if you could afford to buy new or very good second hand. His last van, a little Vauxhall, served him well and allowed him to make continental journeys (Southern Germany, in his case) that none of us would have contemplated in previous years.

and two stalls, were dark and mysterious. We cleared the first loose box one year to store a bumper crop of apples, I think the rats must have been in heaven, they certainly got the best share. I remember going down to the stable one night, with a pathetic torch, and every apple had been 'sampled'. I still brought some back indoors, they were OK once washed, and the nibbled bits removed!

The old battery room was up a sheer ladder above the tack room, probably the lodging for a stable boy in Victorian England. It had been full of batteries when Dad first arrived, and it was his job to check them all weekly. The house was eventually connected to mains electricity in about 1935.

We know from his ownership of his first Lanchester car that my grandfather must have been quite mechanically minded. The early Lanchester models usually had to have a mechanic as the chauffeur, Granddad did it all himself especially in Ireland, many miles from Dublin. I can imagine him starting the oil engine generator at the back of the coach house which must have been quite a beast, requiring a blowlamp to heat everything up before it was swung over to start it.

The battery room became my main den until one day in my early teens the whole front fell out, I don't think I was entirely to blame, it was already quite rotten, but I must have tried to open the window, Oops! I remember showing it off to one of my first girlfriends, Celia Shelton, around it, I must have been about 14 at the time.

Another early den was an old pigsty, thoroughly cleaned out after that experiment with farming lost its attraction. I remember a side of bacon hanging in the pantry for ages, gradually getting smaller as rashers were regularly sliced off.

The pigsty was at the far end of the stackyard, beyond the thatched barn next to the gate to the fields. We had three saddleback piglets which were grown on until ready for market, two and a half were sold for bacon and we ate up the other half. I can remember cleaning out the pen and being rather disappointed when told there were no others coming, so I adopted it as another den. There were piles of bricks against the stable block stamped J Rayner who had been a brickmaker in the village, from one of the trade guides published in the 1920's and 30's he was established on the Rettendon road. I wonder if these were left over from some earlier building project or from demolition. I was astonished to find a newt living between the bricks when I was moving some for yet another den.