

My Childhood in Wembury by Vyvyen Brendon (née Davis)



It was in the course of compiling a collage of my Devon childhood that I found my own image on the excellent Wembury Local History website. There I was in a school photo taken in 1951, Festival of Britain year, third from the right in the middle row of the top class. I see that my eyes are directed not at

the camera but at Miss Maynard's dog, Chinky. On the back of my own copy I had listed all the names, so that I knew that the more attentive boy standing next to me was Peter Lugar, whose memories feature so vividly on the website. I was



very sad to find that he had died in 2022 – a month after my younger brother Rodney, who can be found on the far right of the middle row in a picture taken the same day of the infant class. He would have been able to contribute rather more to this account than I can for he had the same sort

of photographic memory as Peter - but I have done my best to conjure up our post-war village life.

I think we came to Wembury in 1947, the year in which I turned six, which means that I must have spent some time in the standard 1 classroom. But my only pedagogic memory is of the regime of the wise and clever Miss Maynard in the 'big room', undisturbed by the presence of Chinky in his basket by her desk. In this I was luckier than my brother who spent all his Wembury years under the tutelage of the aptly named Miss Axworthy, who later became Mrs Aldgate

though this did not change her nature. The ‘great disciplinarian’ described by Peter was Rodney’s *bête-noire*. He never forgot her hitting him over the knuckles for making mistakes in his writing or threatening to take him home with her if he didn’t behave – ‘and I kick in bed’, she would say. Nowadays she wouldn’t have got away with either form of chastisement and I don’t think Rodney thrived under them. An undiagnosed dyslexic, he wrote that the fear of such punishment from teachers (and from our father) would ‘freeze the mind’. It was only late in his life that he overcame his writing block to produce stories and poems, from which I have quoted in this article.

The atmosphere in Miss Maynard’s room was much more conducive to education. Even though, as Peter remembers, pupils were allowed to talk to each other during lessons and Standards 2, 3 and 4 did different work at the same time, we seemed to learn a lot. I know I benefited from many of the activities Peter mentions: singing hymns at Assembly with Miss Maynard at the piano; library periods and reading books aloud in class; drill in the playground with our skirts tucked into our knickers; and nature rambles in which I learned the names of the many wild flowers growing in the hedges. I’m afraid I didn’t progress beyond the triangle in the percussion band or the tray-cloth in needlework but I’m pretty sure that I was picked out as worthy of extra coaching at Miss Maynard’s house for the 11-plus exam. Not all the children enjoyed what the school had to offer; I remember one occasion when a boy (was it Peter Eames, second from left in top row?) got so fed up with it all that he ran off into the neighbouring fields. Nor was the school free from playground bullying. The other girls would sometimes put me against a wall and try to make me admit to being a ‘snob’ because I didn’t have a Devon accent – and I usually submitted. On the other hand, there were many carefree games of hopscotch, grandmother’s footsteps and ‘The Farmer’s in his Den’.

It's surprising that I didn't ‘talk Devon’ as I was born in Exmouth and, when bombs started to fall on Exeter, lived on the Bicton estate where my maternal grandparents worked as head cook and chauffeur. After the war my father returned from his RNVR service on hazardous Atlantic and Arctic convoys to resume his work as a journalist. While we were living in Wembury he was West Country correspondent for the *News Chronicle* (a newspaper which closed in 1960), which meant that he could be called out to cover stories anywhere in the south-west peninsula. I was reminded of one of those stories while listening on Zoom to Robin Gray’s fascinating talk about the building of Sutton harbour. His slide of HMS *Amethyst* jogged a memory of that name being spoken at home and I realised that my father must have reported on the enthusiastic reception given to the *Amethyst* in Plymouth in November 1949. During an attack by Chinese Communists on the

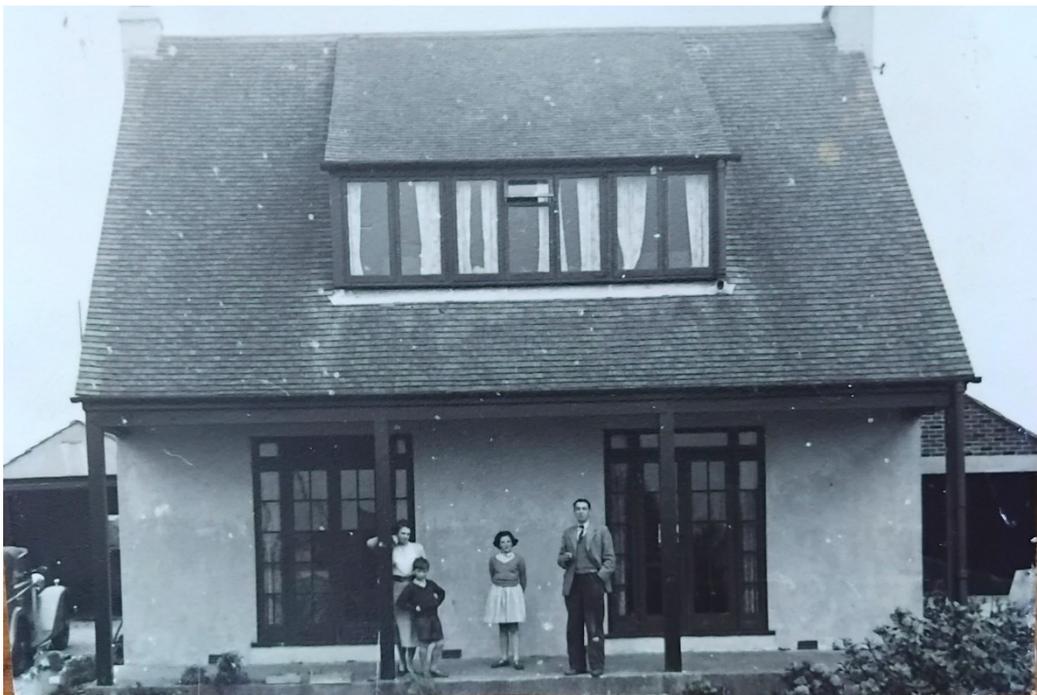


Yangtze River in April 22 of her crew had been killed and 31 wounded and it was only after three months that she was able to make a daring escape and return to British shores. At the age of eight I was probably most interested in the ship's cat, Simon, which had survived serious injuries and received a special medal.



It was because of my father's job that we had a telephone, a rare commodity in the village in those days, as Peter points out. It features in this photo taken in the sitting-room of our house in Brownshill Lane, which my parents called 'Bryer' after their favourite island in Scilly, the homeland of my father's forebears. On a visit to the village

in 2006 I found that it's now named, more grandly, Merton House and that the veranda has been covered in but that otherwise it hasn't changed much. I know that from this house we used to go on family walks all the way up the lane and cross a ferry to Newton Ferrers or Noss Mayo. I wonder whether that's still possible.



Mostly, though, I remember the things we children did on our own. Rodney and I walked down the hill to school and back home for lunch cooked by our mother, except on Thursdays when she went shopping in Plymouth and we had school lunch preceded by the sung Grace quoted by Peter. Rodney used to go to play with Andrew Yabsley, who lived at 7 Brownhill Lane, and my best friend was Penny Barnett, with whom I used to go to church on Sundays and to weekly Brownie meetings in the Parish Hall. This involved winning badges for such achievements as reading and swimming, promising to do our duty 'to God and the King', and joyous tracking around the village. I see from a photograph in the Peter Lugar Archive that we both attended Nina Densum's birthday party in Beach View Crescent, even though she was younger than us; there I am squashed up to Penny's right on a swing seat crammed with little girls. Another useful piece of evidence is my autograph album containing poetic contributions from Penny, Nina and from Josie Joliffe who stands next to me in the school photo.

A wise old owl sat in an oak,
The more he heard the less he spoke,
The less he spoke more he heard,
We all should imitate this wise old bird.

Penny
8/4/51

To write on pink
is waste of ink
To write on Blue
means I love you

Nina
1951

If you get married and have twins
Don't come to me for
Safety Pins.

Josie Joliffe
12-1-51



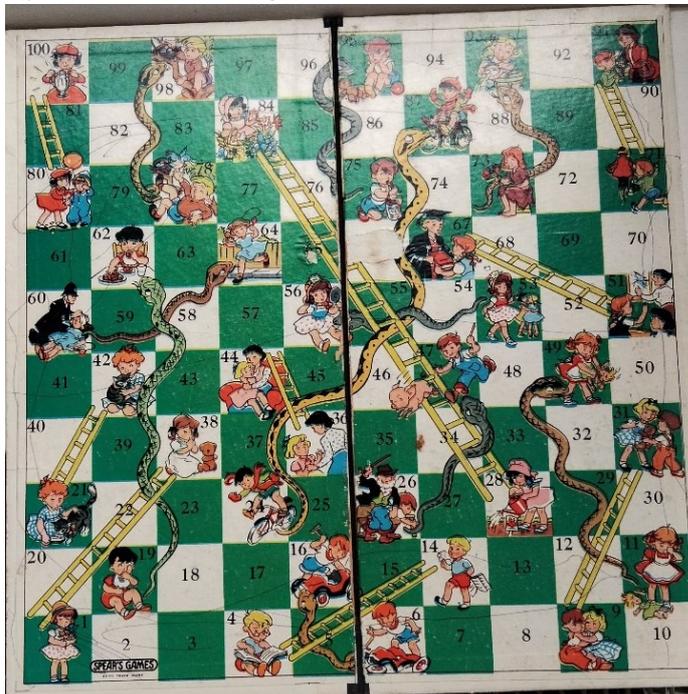
Of course, as Peter wrote, 'there was

always so much to do in the woods and fields, on the cliffs and on the beach', which we were free to roam, with hardly any traffic to endanger us, as this contemporary postcard shows. Wembury beach is now famous for its rock pools, in which Rodney and I gathered seaweed and limpets and ticked off items in the I-SPY books which were just being published.



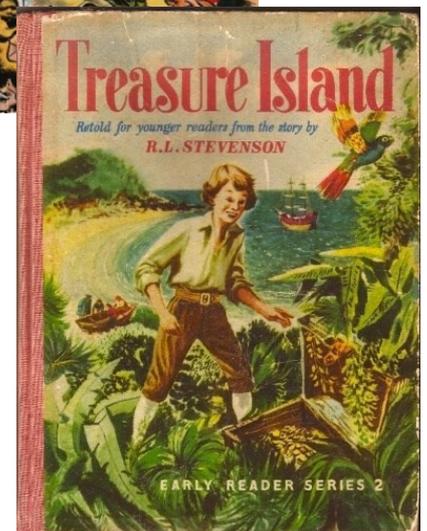
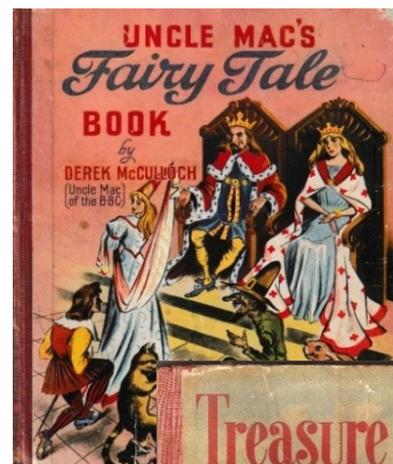
Not everything we got up to was so wholesome. I'm ashamed to admit that I joined in name-calling to an unpopular 'busybody' called Mrs Baggott and that, like Peter, my friends and I we would hide in the hollow ash tree on Church Road ready to spring out and frighten passing old ladies. More seriously, there was a village scandal which was the subject of a police inquiry: some of the older children used to gather in an air-raid shelter and expose themselves to each other. I dimly remember getting drawn into this activity on at least one occasion, but it didn't exactly scar me for life.

I suppose that in later years my parents might also have been investigated since they used often to go to the Jubilee Inn in the evenings, leaving my brother and



me on our own. We never came to any harm though I do remember that, on one occasion, Rodney was upset about something and I had to ask our neighbours, Mr and Mrs Soppett, for come round. But both of us also had many happy memories of that house. 'Toys were hard to come by' in post-war austerity days, as Peter recalls, but we treasured those that we had: a little dolls' house with lattice windows, a ragged doll called Betty and a simple train set in Rodney's bedroom. I

still possess a reversible board with Ludo on one side and Snakes and Ladders on the other, complete with illustrations characteristic of the time and our own scribbles. No doubt, we played on that in the evenings as well listening to *Children's Hour* and, Rodney remembered, to 78 vinyl records containing songs like *The Foggy Foggy Dew*. I have also kept some of the books we were given as Christmas and birthday presents, printed on soft thick paper, which was presumably the only sort available. Rodney also liked to listen to Mummy reading him *Daily Express* strips about the adventures of Rupert Bear. So entranced was he by Rupert's voyages, that he tried flying from the top of the stairs 'supported by nothing other than my arms ... into a freedom I can only imagine' - or so he recounted in one of his stories. This bedtime photo catches a rather cosier moment from our childhood.

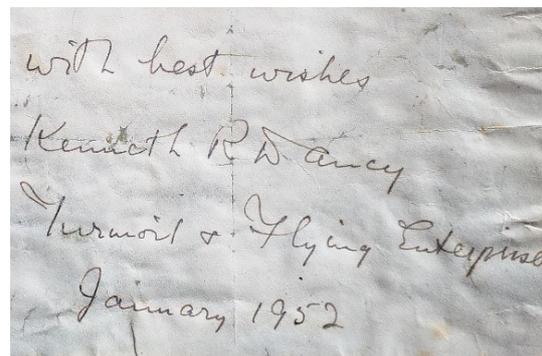


There was as little choice of food as of toys in post-war years. In my experience, as well as Peter's, 'the only peaches we ever saw were in tins, oranges were only seen at Christmas' and grapes were only to be seen beside the beds of hospital patients - though 'apples were in abundance'. Sweets and chocolate were rationed to twelve ounces a week until 1953 and I can remember how exciting it was to visit the village shop on Saturdays for our precious sherbet fountains or bags of humbugs. The threepenny ice-cream wafers which the proprietor Vic Smith sometimes made and sold there must have been the first ones I ever tasted. We were lucky to live in the country and to have a garden large enough to grow vegetables and keep chickens. Also, our mother knew how to make the best of

the ingredients available – rather like Penny Barnett’s father, a Royal Navy chef who ‘provided the most lovely iced buns fashioned as snowmen’ for the school’s Christmas party. My brother wrote lyrically of her bottling soft fruit in Kilner jars and of helping her to make egg and potato pie, feeling ‘loved and safe in the folds of her apron’. So, I agree with Peter that we didn’t really need the tins of stewing steak which were sent ‘From the children of Canada to the children of Great Britain’ and distributed at school.

A couple of lines in one of Rodney’s poems refer to my mother’s ‘hands worn old by mangle, mop and bucket, still deft at plucking and darning and turning collars’. Of course, labour-saving devices such as washing machines were uncommon in the 1940s when many older houses didn’t even have electricity. As clothing was rationed until 1949 nobody had much choice about what to wear and everything had to be altered and mended. The dress (made by mother) in which I appear in these photos was the only one I had at the time and I suspect the rather smart dressing-gown I am wearing in bed was a present from abroad. And, unless my memory is playing tricks, our underwear had to last a whole week. I agree with my old classmate, though, that ‘we were content with what we had, because we knew no different’.

What we also didn’t know in the summer of 1951 when the school photos were taken is that our Devon days were soon to end. I must have taken and passed the 11-plus in the autumn and I was due to go on to Plymstock Grammar School the following September. Then, soon after we had seen in New Year, the telephone summoned my father to Falmouth, where the wrecked ship *Flying Enterprise* was to be towed into port. The crew and passengers had already been rescued and Captain Carlsen remained on board alone until he was joined by the tugboat’s Mate Kenneth Dancy, who ‘took a long step across the gap as the vessels reeled apart and Captain Carlsen was not on his own any more’. After five days, however, the tow failed amid new storms and the two sailors had no choice but to ‘make a jump for it’. Then, Dancy recounted in an ‘exclusive report to the *News Chronicle*’, ‘we just lay there floating hand in hand



until the *Turmoil* came and hauled us on board’. It was my father who interviewed the gallant Dancy and gained his autograph, which I proudly pasted into my album. This turned out to be Daddy’s last West Country story for, probably as a result of this scoop, he was transferred in February 1952 to the London news desk. I’m sure we were sad to leave behind the friends, the beach, the village and, in my case, the school, which had given us many happy times. We took with us memories and mementoes, which have enabled me, over seventy years later, to make a collage of my childhood. Centred on the christening gown my mother

made from parachute silk in 1941, it traces the ten years I spent on the red shores of south Devon. I miss them still.

