

MEMORIES OF A HAPPY CHILDHOOD NEAR ELVENDON PRIORY, GORING, 1930-45

In 2015 Doreen Miles contacted the Society seeking information on Goring prior to a nostalgic short stay in the area to revisit the haunts of her childhood. She was given a tour of Elvendon Priory where she grew up and I was able to show Doreen round her old school, now the Community Centre, where she received her primary education. On returning home, Doreen wrote an account of her childhood in Goring and kindly donated a copy to our archives. [Ed.]

Elvendon Priory Cottages were built in 1926. My Mum (Lavinia Louisa) and Dad (Edgar John 'Jack' Sanderson born 1896) moved into one of the new semis with my older sister, Barbara (who had been born six months previously in December 1926), for Dad's job as the chauffeur at Elvendon Priory. The other half of the semis was to be occupied by the groom and his family. Dad was 30 and Mum was 25. Dad knew Freddy Wallis (FW), the owner of the Priory, from Solihull (where Dad was staying with relatives) prior to moving to Goring. FW called him Sandy or Sanderson. The move meant full employment for Dad, which was something to be grateful for in 1926.

Dad had a very good life, going to Berlin, Switzerland, France, Scotland, Nice, etc with the family. Freddy had a business in iron and steel in Bilston, Staffs; a company called 'Glynwed'; and another place on the Great West Road out of London. I was born in Elvendon Cottages in March 1930. An early memory, aged two and a half, is of us on a bank picking scented violets, and later of being in the woods picking bluebells.

The Priory

Father was chauffeur at the Priory from 1927 to 1945. There were six cars: a Rolls, a Bentley, a shooting brake, a Sunbeam Talbot, and two others. The Priory electricity was supplied by a large belt-driven engine, for which Dad was responsible when he was at home.

There was a gun room. There were stags' heads on the walls in the front hall. The floors were very slippery, being highly polished. When there were shoots the bigwigs were invited. I was a 'beater', aged 14, with other youngsters, earning 7/- a day. We did the beating and brought the dead birds in. Lads from school were there too: Dad kept chivvying me to keep up and not dally about at the back with the boys! The shoots were a big affair: Lord This and Lord That would roll up in their cars.

In the kitchen garden I remember espaliered peaches growing on the wall. There was a tennis court at the top end. There were greenhouses, an open-air swimming pool at the front of the house, and a lily pond.

Nuns were said to have had a secret tunnel from the Priory to the village church.



Elvendon Priory in 1966 [GGLHS]

Staff at the Priory:

These comprised cook, kitchen maid, housemaid, parlour maid, butler, groom, gardeners, under-chauffeur (Dad's brother, 10 years younger) and a keeper (who bred pheasants and partridges for the shoots). There was a head gardener who was about 80, and an under-gardener called Tooley. I'm not sure how many more under-gardeners there were or how many staff in the house.

In the servants' hall there was a piano which the butler used to play. There were two or three Agas in the kitchen.

Early years

Dad was away a lot when I was small. FW, the boss, had a home in Scotland, Inverinan, for shooting and fishing. There was a gillie [gamekeeper] and his wife to help, and Dad. Culling stags and hauling them down off the mountains. Blair Atholl was another place they went to in Scotland. The servants went up in the Rolls sometimes and I remember Mum going once.

Barbara and Doreen Sanderson [D. Miles]

We had a radio before the war. It needed a wet and a dry battery. If Dad was away and the battery needed charging we had to wait, probably even a month, until he returned - no radio.



In 1937 there was an anthrax outbreak. I was seven when this happened. I was banned from the field. The picture of those cows has stayed with me to this day.

Elvendon Cottages

There was a bus service on the top road, from Cray's Pond to Goring. We had no electricity in the cottage. There was gas, with gas mantles. There was a copper with a fire beneath, lit every Monday morning. There was a gas hob and plenty of wood. Coal was supplied. We had no phone, but there was one in the Priory in the butler's pantry.

Elvendon Priory Cottages in 1966 [GGLHS]



I remember us cooking the roast in an oven by an open fire in the living room on Sundays. We ate rabbit quite a lot and the occasional pheasant when there was a shoot.

The front room had a fireplace but that fire was only lit on special occasions such as at Christmas. I did piano practice in there – it was very cold.

The War

War broke out in 1939, and changed all our lives. We started keeping chickens. We had various people billeted on us at different times – connected to the BBC. Mr Jones who took the photo from which I did the painting – he was lovely. Next, a couple with a two-year-old boy - they were awful. The BBC took over parts of the stable block and garage for storage of valves, etc and accommodation.

Dad was in the Royal Observer Corps. He had to go up on Streatley Hill and spot planes at night (he'd go up by motorbike onto the downs), from midnight to 7am, and had to learn to recognize the silhouettes of planes in the dark. He would do this once or twice a week.

Two land girls, Liverpoolians from Littlewoods, the football pools company, came to work in the woods, with Dad supervising. It was very cold in winter. You had to get coupons for gloves: the land girls would put four pairs on at once. They were given a uniform but maybe no gloves. They were cutting wood for a charcoal burner based just beyond the Priory. Charcoal was very necessary for some war materials. One girl lived with us and one lived next door. These girls were also instructed to plant fir trees on a slope down near Battle Hill: a plantation. After the war one girl went to Australia (she was married to the other's brother). The other girl was later killed in a car crash.

1941 onwards: the war effort

Mr Angel, the farmer, used to work Park Farm, with the help of one lad. During school holidays we helped in the fields muck-spreading, potato-picking, threshing, stooking corn sheaves – even Mum was involved. It was part of the war effort. At grammar school we had to stay on for an hour after school and were paid 6d per 1000 for cutting burrs off grommets (something to do with aircraft).

Life at the Cottages, 1942-43

There were RAF bases up in Woodcote Woods. We were invited to watch films in their improvised cinema – a treat for a 12-year-old girl from the sticks. We sat on wooden benches, while the officers had deckchairs placed on a raised dais.

We would walk through the woods to Flint House, which was another private estate. The chauffeur there and his wife were known to Mum and Dad. This became a wounded Tommies' hospital and we were asked to go to dances there to help these young wounded men, many on crutches!

The Wallis family

Freddy lost his son David early in the war, at Arnhem. I remember a big wedding when a daughter married. There were many cars, and a large bowl of strawberry ice cream from cook.

There were two daughters: the younger, horsey one, Bunty, went to live in Ireland. The firstborn, Peggy, married an army major and had children - one drowned aged two in the lily pond.

I remember when I was three or four, FW's wife used to call and take me for a walk in the woods. She died of cancer in about 1936. FW married again, to a Frenchwoman – it was a failure.

Moving on

At the end of the war Freddy left for Africa, asking Mum and Dad to go with him. Mum refused, as I had one more year at school. So we found ourselves homeless and Dad was out of work and we were out of our tied cottage. Dad was on his way back from Scotland on the Perth to Euston express when he was involved in a train crash. He survived but was out of work.

Freddy had two little girls by his second wife, in Bechuanaland, in Africa.

Reflections

Mum didn't enjoy life at Elvendon Cottages. We didn't realise that until after we had left. She was a townie buried in the country, lonely with no transport other than a bicycle, and she'd push the pram down to the village. In the early days this was hard because the road was unmade. I rode a bike to school from the age of five. I remember coming home from school in the winter, with freezing hands. I would find Mum and a warm fire indoors.

I would sit by the fire in the winter and knit myself a cardigan (aged 10), in blackberry stitch; navy blue for school. Sometimes in summer Mum and us two girls would have a punt on the river. I have very happy memories of conker trees up Elvendon Road and a birds' nest.

My late lamented sister, Barbara, went on to become a company secretary and I became a primary school teacher. We both got married from Solihull.

Doreen Miles, nee Sanderson
