

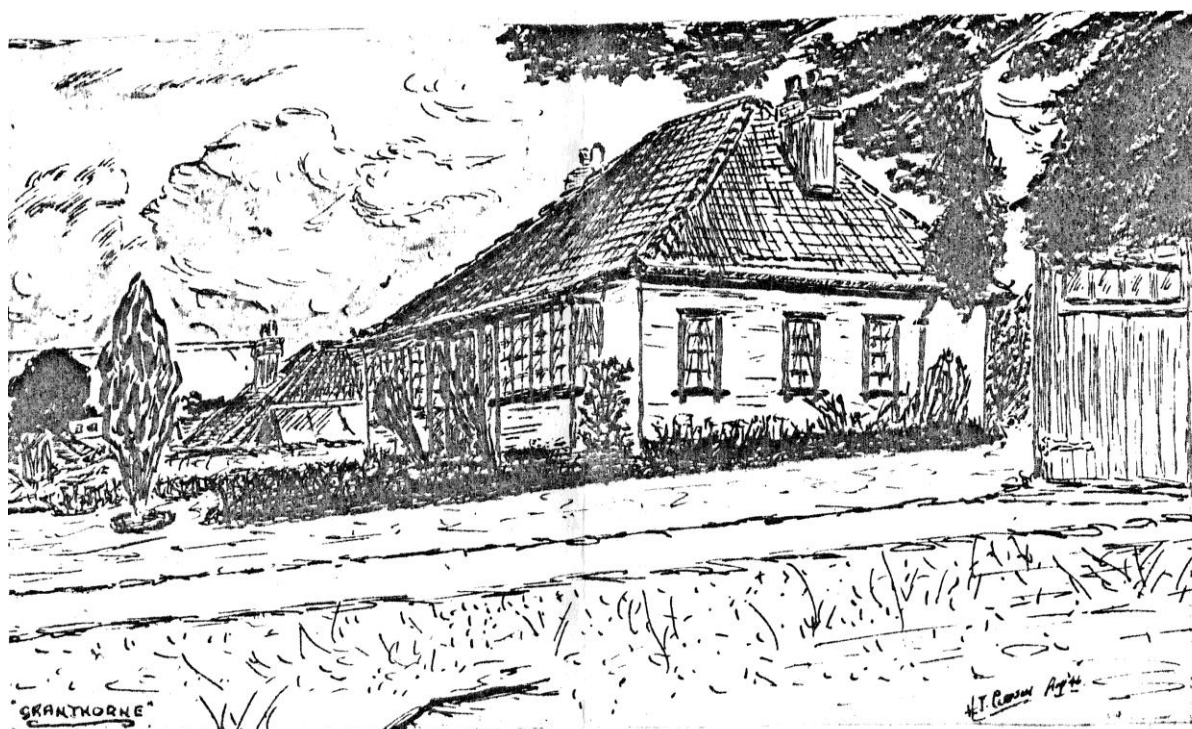
My memories of living in Pratts Bottom during WW2

Marion Clapson

At the outbreak of WW2 we were living in Lewisham. There were seven of us - my parents, Rosina and Ernest Clapson; my uncle and aunt, May and Percy Clapson; my grandfather, Frederick Clapson and my brother Harold (aged 12).

Immediately War was declared my mother took Harold and I down to Haywards Heath in Sussex, where we had friends. We stayed there for about a year but Mum missed being with the family so we went back to London just as the Blitz started in earnest. I have very vivid memories of nights spent in the Air Raid Shelter and coming out in the morning to find houses all around us damaged and burning. An incendiary bomb landed on our roof one night and steadily burnt its way through all three floors - it was then that Dad decided we had to leave. Pratts Bottom, where Aunty May's sister Lou Harrison had rented a bungalow, was not all that far away (though it seemed like the ends of the earth to me at the time) but it was considerably safer than where we were in Lewisham.

The Harrisons' bungalow – Rayleigh - was in Stonehouse Road and with Lou's help Dad found a bungalow to rent in Orchard Road - and so it was that six of us moved to Granthorne. My brother Harold was then staying with our Uncle in Somerset.



HAROLD'S DRAWING OF GRANTHORNE, ORCHARD ROAD, PRATTS BOTTOM – OUR HOME DURING THE WAR.

How all of us fitted into Granthorne I sometimes wonder, but we did. At the time I think there were only four rooms and the bathroom. I shared Mum and Dad's room, my Uncle

and Aunt had a room, as did Grandad (which Harold shared when he eventually joined us in Pratts Bottom). This meant that our communal living space was the very large kitchen. When we went there it was still lit by gas (how carefully one had to handle those fragile gas mantles!) but by the time we left I am sure we had electricity.

To Harold and I, used to the noise and traffic of South East London, life in Pratts Bottom was idyllic. I went to the Village School at the outset, and I do certainly remember the formidable Miss Baxter, who lived quite near us in Orchard Road. I loved climbing trees but don't think I was particularly good at it and once I fell out of a tree right by Miss Baxter's front gate: I was more frightened of being caught by her than the fact that I was getting stung all over by having fallen into a bed of nettles. However, I could not have been at the Village School for long as I was at a small private school in Station Road, Orpington (called Taecan House) when I passed the entrance exam to Bromley County School at the age of 11. From then on I travelled daily to Bromley on the 402, catching the bus outside the Post Office, at that time run by Mr. And Mrs. Hill.

Harold never went to the Village School: he cycled each day to Technical School in Lewisham, frequently laden with mushrooms he had been picking in nearby fields at first light and which were welcomed by his friends and teachers alike! However, at the age of 15 he joined the Royal Navy as an Artificer Apprentice in Torpoint in Devon, and so was only in Pratts Bottom when he was on leave, though he loved going dancing in the Village Hall I remember and had many village friends - names I remember are Laurie Ovenell, Jean Gaunt and Florrie Beckett, daughter of the pub landlord in Halstead. On one of his leaves Harold and I got on our bikes and went scrumping for apples (I can't recall where) but Harold had some apples stuffed in his trouser legs and cycling through the village one of his bicycle clips came off and the apples cascaded into the road - needless to say we pedalled pretty hard to escape the evidence of our crime!

My friends included several children who lived in Orchard Road - in particular Edward Prance at Bydawl, Nigel Mastin (or Rings), Audrey Westcott at Burghley, the Emerick boys (Donald and Andrew) at Carwinion and also Sylvia Brewer. I joined Mrs Hulf's Puppet Club and had great fun there with the Hulf children and Edward Prance. I also remember Joan Mitchell and Jean Hammond (I am sure I went to tea at Heather Bank and that we loaned each other books). I remember, too, the Geck family who lived at Hilgay in Orchard Road: their daughter Hetty worked in London and each week used to bring the "Girls Crystal" magazine home for me - a great treasure.... There was a cinder path that led from Orchard Road to the field she crossed on her way home from Knockholt Station, and I waited each week at the end of the cinder path to collect my precious magazine....

However, I especially looked forward to the school holidays when the two granddaughters of Mr. And Mrs. Barker at St. Martins, our next door neighbours, came to stay with their grandparents. Mary and Margaret Asbury lived in Chingford but every holiday was spent at

St. Martins, and we became friends until both passed away some years ago. Their Aunt Mary - (Lilian Mary Barker who was Editor of Pears Cyclopaedia) was the first owner of Middlemarch in Stonehouse Road – in fact I think she had it built – she certainly named the bungalow after her favourite book.



**LEFT TO RIGHT: MARY ASBURY, MARION CLAPSON AND TOBY BARKER
INSIDE THE GATE AT ST. MARTINS, ORCHARD ROAD, PRATTS BOTTOM CIRCA 1942/43**

When Mary Barker died Margaret Asbury (by then Mrs. Gordon Darby) moved into Middlemarch and remained there until her death. Mary Asbury married and moved to Norfolk, where she passed away a year or two after her younger sister.

Of our neighbours in Orchard Road, I have many memories: the Barkers were a lovely couple (I can still see Mr Barker galloping across the lawn at St. Martins clinging to his motor mower for dear life!) and on our other side, at Avoca, were Mr. And Mrs. Thomas Gorham. Mrs Gorham was very deaf and her husband, who was going to work at the time as far as I can remember, was worried that she did not hear the Air raid Warning so Mum used to prop a newspaper in the window as a signal to Mrs. Gorham that she should take shelter. Poor Mrs. Gorham, she must have been constantly watching the window. The Gorhams did not have children of their own and were very kind to me: they owned a bungalow at Dymchurch and one weekend they took me there to stay with them as a treat. I think it was the first time I had been away from my mother, but I do remember the Gorhams gave me a

really happy weekend. They had two lovely black dogs – both mongrels I think – called Bambi and Dumbo. Bambi was killed by a car one day and poor Dumbo just pined away.

To me childhood memories come like a series of film clips, forever etched on my mind. It seems as if the sun was always shining in summer and in winter the snow was always crisp and pristine. There are so many of these memories in my mind's eye – the night Edward accidentally dropped a lighted squib into a large box of fireworks outside his house and Mrs Prance dragging us into the house for safety whilst the fireworks exploded in every direction – Orchard Road was festooned with spent firework cases the following morning. Then there is Mrs. Westcott serenading us children – her husband on the piano – with a rendering of “We’ll Gather Lilacs”, so popular at the time – and of course dear Mrs. Ellen Westbrook at her bungalow Twittenden, singing to her red and grey parrots which she kept in a lean-to at the back of the house, encouraging them to join in ! I never hear the song “I hear You Calling Me” without once more being transported back to that time. It seemed the parrots especially appreciated that particular tune – they certainly joined in the chorus!

Summer days meant going to Birthday Woods for picnics with the Asbury girls from St.Martins (with Toby, the Barkers’ elderly cocker spaniel, plodding behind) and stopping on the way across the field at the top of Stonehouse Road to feast on the masses of tiny, sweet wild strawberries growing there. And these days, whenever I see a field of bright yellow rapeseed in Spring and early Summer, I am transported back to the field that lay between the cinder path from Orchard Road and Sevenoaks Road. When planted with rapeseed it was a sight to behold at flowering time – and a place where we loved to play hide and seek amid the tall plants, getting dusty with yellow pollen. (The farmer – whoever he was – never caught us!)

Winter and deep snow brings thoughts of Harold and I building a very authentic-looking igloo in the garden at Granthorne, the remains of which were still evident on the grass towards the end of May! Another magical moonlit night I recall tobogganing with Edward and Nigel on the hill opposite the bottom of Orchard Road where it meets Rushmore Hill. It remained magical until our gloves and feet got soaked through and then we were glad to go home again.

Opposite Granthorne – between Burghley and Twittenden I think – were the foundations of a house that was obviously in the process of being built when War broke out and building stopped. These foundations were a great place for us children to play and we spent many hours there, climbing over the walls which were about a few feet high. Nobody worried about us, but I am sure they would be considered a risky playground in these health and safety conscious days! I think my friend Margaret Asbury told me that the property eventually built there was called Slopes, but I could be wrong.

Despite the War we children were safe in the village – we could go unaccompanied for long trips into Birthday Woods (I remember the Birthday Tree well) again without our parents worrying about us, which I don't think would be the case nowadays. We set off for the day with packets of sandwiches (most of which we had eaten before we had reached the Woods!)

However, I do have clear memories of the War: standing on our front door step at Granthorne at night and seeing the Doodlebugs flying over towards London and listening with dread for the moment the engine cut out, knowing it would then crash at any moment. We spent countless nights in our Anderson Air Raid Shelter behind the garage - Grandad in a Morrison Table Shelter in the garage (which Harold shared with him when he was home on leave!) A happier memory is of Mum helping to make flags to decorate Orchard Road on VE Day. Probably she also celebrated by making some of her "Mock Banana" from a recipe in a newspaper – made by using mashed parsnip and banana essence. It seemed very good at the time (since we could not remember what a banana tasted like) though I doubt it would pass muster these days!

Amid all these pleasant memories of our time at Granthorne, however, one event occurred which cast a very long shadow over our family. In 1941 Dad bought Mum a bicycle so that she could cycle over to Green Street green etc and she decided to practise in the garden at Granthorne. Unfortunately she chose a day when the grass was a bit wet, the bike slipped and she fell, tangling her leg in the bicycle frame. The result was that she fractured her femur bone and even though she had to spend seven months in Farnborough Hospital it never healed correctly and she was badly crippled and endured great pain for the rest of her long life. Children in those days were not allowed to visit the Hospital in the way that they can today – and I remember Aunt May taking me to stand in the grounds of the Hospital so that my mother could see me in a mirror that was fixed above her bed – so I just stood and waved at the window! However, they did allow me in to see her at Christmas – and they stood me on a table in the Ward to draw the Christmas Raffle. When she finally left hospital it was with a heavy full-length metal calliper on her leg which eventually became more than she could bear. By removing it I suppose she actually made her condition very much worse but she could not endure the pain of wearing it. Needless to say for the rest of his life Dad bitterly regretted the day he had bought the bicycle....

Our neighbours in Orchard Road were kind and helpful at this difficult time – especially the Barkers, the Gorhams and Mrs Dorothy Prance at Bydawyl – but life for us was overshadowed by this event. Dr. Glover was also a great stalwart to us, especially when Mum was allowed home.

When the War ended we waited for our house in Lewisham to be repaired and eventually we moved back there – Dad had the option to buy Granthorne for a ridiculously small sum (or so it seems today – Harold told me once that he thought it was about £500) but with all

the uncertainty of Mum's problems and having the house in Lewisham he decided not to buy Granthorne.

And so we left the village – with many happy and some sad memories of our time there. I have never forgotten it and some years back paid a visit to look at the old haunts. Orchard Road seemed fairly unchanged, Granthorne had been enlarged, and the rest of the village seemed very built up of course. We had lunch at The Bull's Head – Ernie Russell was the Licensee when my Dad, Grandad and Uncle used to patronise it! – and then took a walk up to the Village School. It was there I really had a sense of times past and lingering regret for days that are long gone.

We did not remain in London for many years. Mum's disability was obviously going to worsen over time so we decided to move down to the South Coast where she would have a better life. Grandad had passed away in 1952 and my brother married that year. Thus in 1953 the rest of us moved down to the Sussex coast where I have lived ever since, Dad being the last of my "Oldies" to pass away in 1991 at the age of 91. My brother remained in the Royal Navy with great success until he retired, passing away in 2007 at the age of 80.

So now there is just me – with the bittersweet memories of a wartime childhood in Pratts Bottom – and perhaps it is fitting that I once again find myself living in a village where everyone knows everyone else and there is a sense of community – something to be treasured in this fast moving world where life seems to be increasingly impersonal. It is nice to think that Pratts Bottom has not been completely swallowed up by nearby towns and has managed to keep its identity and is thriving still. I hope it may remain so for many years to come.

Marion Clapson-2013