

My Memories of Benson by David Lane

My first home in Benson was at 2 Coronation Cottages; at No1 lived Mick and Jean Passey with their four children; at No3 was Cyril and Ida Field with their children Pauline and Robert, (Cyril was a keen fisherman and occasionally caught a pike in the local weir pool and, if it was large enough, we would be offered half); Horace and Ellen Gurney lived in No4.

When we moved in the only water supply was a pump by the kitchen sink and, the toilet was in an outhouse down the garden. Bath night came once a week, and meant we all shared one lot of water in the tin bath in front of the fire, the water having been heated in the washing machine. I remember Dad enthusiastically demolishing the old copper in the corner of the kitchen before redecorating; I think we all laughed at his efforts, even with Mums help, to paper the ceiling. It was about two or three years later that the old coal shed at the back of the house was converted into a bathroom. For the first few weeks I seem to remember Mum had difficulty stopping my brother and I having a bath every day.

Later, the rooms above Chamberlains shop were converted into a flat and we moved in there. In some ways this was a good move but not in others; literally living above the shop meant that the 'Riverside Café' could send someone early on Sunday morning to ask for extra eggs and bacon if a coach turned up unexpectedly. Of course Dad would curse but he would still open the shop to get them what they wanted, even if it meant having to cut fresh bacon and then clean the bacon-slicer again. I remember once when he was showing someone how to clean the bacon-slicer he said, "Never do this," and he promptly put his finger near the blade and cut his finger open!

Before we moved into the flat, I can remember there were at least three separate break-ins at the shop. One was just before Christmas when some borstal boys got in and ate half a Christmas cake, leaving teeth marks in the icing. The most memorable one was when an inept burglar tried to blow open the safe; in doing so he managed to destroy the safe, the office in the back of the shop as well. The body of the safe was pushed out through the bay window while the door took down the entire wooden partition wall that had stood opposite and imbedded itself in the shelving beyond. There was jam, disinfectant, rice and all sorts of goods smashed when the shelves collapsed. The amazing thing was none of the neighbours heard a thing.

The shop needed a lot of staff considering its size, about eight or nine if memory serves me. There was Tony Cook who drove the van delivering bread and grocery orders, while Peter Lomas was training to be a manager. Mrs. Barnard and Enid Brighting also worked there then. Mr. Hammond used to work part time tidying and keeping the storerooms clean. I must confess that Stephen and I never got on with Mr. Hammond; we were probably the bane of his life. At one time he used to be the local mobile fish and chip man, using an ex-army lorry, which he later converted into a home on the small caravan site in Mill Lane. My father said that it still smelt of fish and chips several years after it was converted.

My favorite person in the shop was Tony Cook, except when he gave me a 'dry shave,' by rubbing his unshaven chin on my cheek, "Ouch." On good days he would allow me to go on the bread round with him, if I was up early enough. It was lovely to sit in a small van full of warm bread, with its tempting aroma. One day he was offered a cup of tea at one house and, while he was gone, I ate the middle out of a sandwich loaf!

The old bread van was a Morris Minor with a windscreen that you could push open from the bottom. I well remember my excitement as I encouraged Tony to go faster down a long hill, and the whole van shook as we got up to a scary sixty miles an hour.



Mary Cook, Louise Lane, Tony Cook

Somewhere I didn't like to go was Fyfield Manor, because there were too many stories about it being haunted. These include tales of hideous faces at the windows and of the little girl who appeared to anyone who ran around what had been a fountain, because she was supposed to have drowned in it years before. I always ran to the back door and quickly placed the bread on the bottom step of the stairs before running back to the van as fast as I could.



David & Stephen in the sand c1960

Stephen and I often played in Birmingham Yard and, looking back, I think that the residents weren't always pleased with the amount of noise we made. There was always a pile of sand by the door to Harry West's shed where we spent many hours building castles and battlegrounds so that we could play with our 'Dinky Toys' and model soldiers. Gran was always concerned in case we fell over while running about because the yard was made up of compacted ground strewn with flints. Ivy still has a fit of the giggles when she thinks of me marching up the yard singing 'Davy Crocket' while wearing my imitation raccoon skin hat; it became my nickname for a while.

Uncle Freddie (Parks) used to play jokes on us quite often and used to call out that we were like "a rasher of wind and a fried snowball". I have no idea where those names came from. The only clue is that Stephen had white hair when he was small and was often called 'Snowball'. When I was young Freddie told me that beetroot juice would make my hair curl if it were rubbed on my head. Before anyone could stop me, my hands were in the bowl and I was rubbing beetroot juice into my hair. Needless to say, it didn't work.



Freddie watches 'Snowball' while filling a bucket of water (corner of No1 the Yard, notice the old wooden waterbutt)

Benson, even in the 50's, was a quite village and we were able to wander where we wanted. I remember Stephen following along behind as a group of my friends and I rode over to Berrick one day; his poor little legs were going ten to the dozen, trying to keep up with us, as he only had a tiny bike with stabilizer wheels on the back. Even before the age of ten, I

would think nothing of biking over to Drayton St Leonard or up to Swyncombe Downs with a couple of friends from school.



David, Lizzie & Stephen Lane, outside No1 the Yard

If a boy had a few sweets in his pocket he could survive for several hours around the village, as there were places that could be found with water fit to drink. No one walked around with bottles of fizzy drink, and ring-pull cans hadn't been invented then; 'Idris Ginger Beer' is the first can of drink I can remember. The water from the higher reaches of the brook, above Passey's yard, was considered safe to drink. Another spot we often used was at the bottom of Mill Lane, where the track forked just past the mill house and opposite Colonel Hardcastle's house. On the left hand side of the track was a garden wall and, along the bottom of this, ran water no more than a foot wide and a couple of inches deep. It was often full of slimy weed but, if that were moved away, the water seemed to be perfectly good, and cold, especially nice on a hot day.

A popular game was dressing up to play 'English and Germans', we had parts of uniforms and even makeshift guns that looked the part. David Colclough had an older brother who made a wooden sten-gun that looked very real from a distance. At one time, we even had part of a Lee Enfield rifle and a revolver that we carted about. We fought out various pitched battles, mostly across St Helens Avenue, an ideal location, as there were ditches on both sides of the road, and no houses at that time.

When we weren't dressing up in our father's old army jackets and playing wars we were usually down by the river fishing. Several of us used to fish from the landing stage catching small roach and bream. I remember one particular fish that Stephen caught, after he had missed several bites; he was still only about seven years old and not very strong, so we told him to strike harder. He was standing on the bank, with his back to one of the old willow trees, when he wrenched the rod back as hard as he could. A poor bream of about half a pound came out of the water like a rocket and was left dangling from the branches of the tree. I think we did manage to cut it down and get it into the water before it expired.

During the summer Salters steamers would be tied-up at the landing stage at lunchtime, putting a stop to any fishing. Robert Flower, I think it was, started diving for pennies when the passengers threw them in the water, I think he even took to swimming underneath the boat from one side to the other. It was Bubbles Smith who went one better and swam to the danger sign and back one day. Back then, if we were out playing, we came home when we were hungry. None of us had the aid of a watch, as we couldn't afford one, but the appetite can be a remarkably accurate timepiece.



Stephen & David.

The training wheels were put back on my little red and yellow bike when Stephen inherited it a few years later

The river seemed to flood most winters, some years much worse than others. One winter we were able to walk across the ice that covered the water meadows after the river, that had covered them several inches deep, had frozen. We took great delight in breaking through the ice to reach the water that still lay underneath. When the river became dangerously high the wife of the lockkeeper, Mr. Jeffries, would come to stay at our house, as it was too dangerous to cross the weir. I can recall one winter's evening when my family went across to the lock keepers house for tea, and we watched 'Bilko' on TV. When it came time to go home the river had risen to just below the walkway and by morning it had become almost impassable.

In a child's eye one of the very best places to play was in Passey's Yard; we would climb amongst the old vehicles and make camps in some of them, sometimes we even played in the slaughterhouse. We never worried about falling or getting a bit of oily mud in a cut. It seemed like great fun to look for cow horns among the cattle bones, blood and maggots. Perhaps we were unaware of danger or just perhaps liked the dangerous things more and I suppose we must have become immune to most diseases or none of us would be here now. We even dug up old live ammunition in a field up at the 'Sands' and tried to get it to go 'bang.' What about health and safety? Thankfully that bureaucracy didn't exist in those days, so no one could spoil our fun, unlike today when children are seemingly permanently wrapped in cotton wool in front of a computer.

Once a plane came off the end of the runway up at the watercress beds and the following day one boy came to school proudly wearing the pilots helmet that he had managed to sneak off with, along with a couple of other souvenirs. At least that plane didn't explode, unlike the one that destroyed a house in Preston Crowmarsh. I remember looking on in awe at the bizarre sight of all the surrounding trees that had lost their leaves and turned a weird mixture of pink and orange, due to the burnt aircraft fuel.



Foot Peddle & Name Plate

Another event that concerned planes was the day I was introduced to Bob Brighting's father. Dad took me with him to meet this elderly man who was confined to his bed, I'm not sure why, suffice to say he seemed extremely old to me. For some reason I was given a round wooden 'jar', with a lid, that contained two pieces of metal, one brass and one aluminium. I was told that the 'jar' and its contents were from a plane that had been shot down during WWI. The 'jar' was made from the nose-cone and the piece of brass was a small name plate, while the aluminium one was one of the peddles; both bore the name AVRO. Unfortunately I have been unable to find out anything about the items, there is just a vague memory of being told that the plane was actually a German one and, the first to be shot down in 1914. The 'jar' disappeared some years ago but I still have the two metal items (see above).

Looking at the brook in Brook Street now it doesn't seem possible that we used to be able to catch all sorts of creatures in it. In the 50's there were bullheads hiding under stones as well as cadis lava living in their own tiny tubes made of grains of sand glued together. The weed was full of shrimps, tiny trout and bullhead fry. Once or twice a year it was possible to catch brown trout and all you needed was a short rod with some line and a hook. The best bait to use were the red worms from my Gran's midden, we kept them in a tobacco tin filled with sphagnum moss. The trout used to hide under the numerous bridges that crossed the brook or under overhanging foliage. We would sometimes catch two or three fish big enough to eat.

The best place to find minnows was down at the 'White Railings,' there always seemed to be a shoal under the bridge there. Sometimes fishermen from the river would pay a few coppers for half a dozen minnows, as they were good bait for perch. If we wanted to catch sticklebacks we had to cycle over to Roke, where the brook crosses under the road and there is a right hand turn to go into the village. It was possible to find leeches here as well, as the water was much slower running than in Benson brook and had a good layer of silt in the bottom.



My first 'new' bike (outside the backdoor of the Old Surgery)

As was usually the way, most of our toys were homemade or secondhand, especially the larger items, like bikes. Dad bought me a bike (see above), as spare parts, from a garage in Roke, he then built it himself, as it was a cheaper way of doing it than buying a readymade one. When I was about four I had the lid of a tea chest painted green and this was my farm,

where I played with my little lead farm animals. An old wooden box, that had previously contained dried currents, had a hole drilled in one side to allow the bolt from the center of a wooden wheel to be placed in it. This then gave me a steering wheel, I could now drive a car, or a bus, even a boat, my imagination was endless.

By the time I was eight or nine I had a wooden soapbox cart, as did many other boys in the village, the first one was made by Dad, but we soon learnt to do repairs and then build our own. Rowland and David Passey built a cart from an ex-army rifle crate; this was able to carry four small boys at once. Like so many others before it came to a sticky end, when it crashed, in this case it was the gatepost at the bottom of Colonel Hardcastle's drive.

Of course we weren't always angels by any means. One thing we sometimes did that wasn't very sociable was to tie a 'banger' to a sixpenny rocket and then light the rocket and drop it in the brook just below a bridge. The idea behind this was to hope that the 'banger' went off under the bridge, as the noise would be amplified. I also remember one idiotic boy, (looking back he must have been) who made weed killer bombs with copper pipe to blow up the riverbank. One went off in his hand but fortunately, he didn't lose his hand, or even a finger.

When we weren't making our own entertainment there were always the cubs and sea scouts to join; was it 'Pop' Baker who ran the scouts? I was even in the church choir for a time but I was very shy and never managed to sing loud enough really.

Mrs. Nora Palmer, the vicar's wife, used to take the occasional lesson at school and I well remember the day she told us all about the wonderful things that were found when a grave was dug in the new cemetery. As well as ancient bones, there was a large gold ring and pieces of pottery. It started an interest in archeology that I still have today; perhaps family history is my version. It certainly takes good investigative skills and the ability to sift through quantities of information; or is it closer to the detecting prowess of Hercule Poirot perhaps?



'Bubbles' Smith; -? ; Sandra ? ; Ken Ibel; -? ; -? ; -? ; -? ; -? ; Bobby Martin
-? ; Belinda Collett; Susan ?; Jennifer ?; Francis Passey; -? ; -? ; Peter Keeble
Tony Moody; Rowland Passey; -? ; Geoffrey Hudspeth; Leslie Carter; Robert Flower; David Lane; Nicky Parslow
Benson School c1958

Stephen and I started our education at the old C of E primary school in Oxford Road. When I first attended, the toilets were still the old ones outside where the pupils got wet when it rained, as our parents undoubtedly had years before. Children from as far away as Roke, Berrick and Drayton St Leonards also came to school in Benson. Although unlike, Freddie Parks who lived in Berrick as a child, I don't think any had to walk all the way there and back every day.

I fondly remember that my first class teacher was Miss. George; and the headmaster was Mr. Bennett. I wonder if I became a teacher's pet as, in my last year, not only was I ink monitor but I also rang the school bell every morning; do they still do that? They seemed to hold wonderful Christmas parties in those days, we took our own cups for a drink of 'pop', one year two boys toasted each other and the handle came off one of their cups.

We took the eleven-plus test back then but I remember being more concerned with passing my Red Cross test after school that same day. I'm not sure whether anyone in my class passed and got to Grammar School, I think we all went to the new secondary school at Berinsfield. I quite enjoyed myself in the short time I was there, except for the day that I was told the boy I usually sat next to had drowned in the river Thame near Drayton St Leonard.

Two other children died in tragic accidents while we lived in Benson but I can't remember there being anything like the fuss that seems to be made today, only a great sadness. There was no ridiculous counselling in those days so, just like everyone else I got on with life, after saying a prayer in assembly.

One of those boys did come back to haunt me several years later. At the time, we lived in Great Missenden, and I had recently started my first job after leaving school at fifteen and found myself a girlfriend. Her name was Lynn, she lived in Prestwood, the next village, a ten minute bicycle ride away. One particular night I was late arriving at her home but, when I knocked on the door she welcomed me in, saying she knew I would be late. I puzzled over this remark as I followed her into the sitting-room where her mother was sitting at a low coffee table. After I was invited to sit down Lynn asked if I had any questions for the 'Spirits'! I was now totally lost and didn't understand what she meant.

I was told to place a finger gently on the upturned glass that had been placed on the coffee table, in the center of a circle of small cards, on each of which was written an individual letter of the alphabet. I knew nothing about séances and didn't know what to expect, least of all what was about to be spelt out in front of me. When Lynn asked if there was a message for me the glass slid across the table and spelt out 'yes'. When asked what it was I slowly turned very pale as the message was spelt out. The message was from a boy that I had hardly known and, who had died about six years before. There was also the fact that neither Lynn nor her mother could have known anything about him. I can't remember what the message was now but I do remember the feeling I had when I saw the boys name spelt out in front of me. That night after I left Lynn's house I peddled along those dark tree lined lanes as fast as I could and arrived home in record time.

Just across Oxford Road from the school was Pengilly's Farm where they kept red-pole cattle; after school I used to like to watch the cows being milked there and was allowed to help with feeding the hens and collecting eggs. This was the first of the farms to be found on entering the village from Oxford. Bert West's farm, with his black and white cows milling about in the yard, could be found on the corner of Castle Square and Watlington Road. From

there it was a short walk up the High Street to College Farm, although I always knew it as Franklin's farm, and it was when looking through the large farm gates there that I remember seeing a traction engine driving a threshing machine in the yard. I remember it simply because I was amazed that a farmer would have a machine painted SO pink! The engine was belching smoke and the thresher made a terrific clatter while the long leather belts turned the flywheel. I watched the men as they fed the sheaves of corn up into the top of the machine and then struggled with the huge sacks when they had been filled.

In the mid 50's, Coronation Cottages overlooked the field at the back of College Farm and I remember running upstairs to see what all the noise was about when they killed two pigs out there. Being only six or seven years old I was frightened by all the terrible squeals the animals made but I soon got to know the difference between things that need to be done to sustain life and things that are just cruel for their own sake. Corn was often grown in that field and, when it was cut, I also watched the men and dogs catching the rats and rabbits that had sheltered in the last bit left standing.

The next farm was in Brook Street, on the right hand side, opposite The Farmer's Man pub, and that belonged to Mr. Cherrill. I remember Frank Cherrill always wore a brown smock coat and walked his one Jersey cow down the High Street and then into Mill Lane and down to the fields. Paddock House, the home of the Stubbs family, backed onto Mr. Cherrill's farmyard and occasionally the cows managed to get into the garden and cause havoc. When Ivy worked for Mrs. Stubbs she was once involved in trying to help Mr. Cherrill get the cows out of the garden and they ended up with a cow getting into the garage, doing damage to the car.

The only other farms close to the village were Battle Farm in Preston Crowmarsh, Fyfield Manor and The Hale. These last three seemed to be far more commercial and not the least bit child friendly.



David & Stephen outside No1

It's odd that I can remember more about No1 Birmingham Yard forty-five years ago than I can about the first home my wife and I shared thirty years ago. I can remember the furniture and even where the pictures were hung and things hadn't changed much in the previous forty years either.

The front porch was surrounded by a very old yellow flowered winter jasmine, which also ran along under the kitchen window. On entering the front door, there was the small vestibule with three doors leading off, one in front and one on either side. The door immediately in front was the pantry, a small room the same width as the entrance, the floor of which was lifted up to reveal the cellar. There was just one high shelf that went round all four walls and this was where Gran kept her jars of jam, chutney and fruit.

The door to the left was, like all the others in the house a four-panel door, except for one odd difference. It had two round holes cut into it, one in the top of each upper panel. Joe had cut these when he fitted a new kitchen range because the range didn't fit the hearth and, as it had to stand forward, it sometimes allowed smoke back into the room, the holes allowed more air flow to prevent this. Stepping into the room, to the left of the door was the old radio standing on a shelf; then the left hand wall was where the butlers sink with its single cold tap stood, below the window. For several years Gran kept a budgerigar, which she called Joey, who lived in a cage on the windowsill.

Against the wall immediately opposite the door stood a kitchen dresser, which housed the china and pots and pans, then to its right was the large pine kitchen table. In the ceiling to the right of the dresser was a large iron hook on which the bacon used to be hung. On the wall over the table were the photograph of the football and cricket teams and a print of a horse, watching a car go by apparently thinking he was redundant. There was also the photo of Lizzie in her Confirmation dress. There were also several of the old horse brasses that had been used to adorn the ponies in earlier years. At the far end of the table was Gran's Windsor slat-back armchair, where she always sat. The wall on the right was where the gleaming black kitchen range stood on the whitened hearth, with built-in cupboards either side of the chimneybreast. Hanging from a hook from the mantle shelf was a fly swatter; a piece of wire mesh on the end of a twisted wire handle. Ranged along the wall between the door and the end wall were five slat-back kitchen chairs. On the wall above the chairs were hung more pictures, one of a girl with a sheave of corn, one very pre-Raphaelite picture of a girl I always called 'Maid Marion' (that I still have) and lastly the picture I always thought was of my grandfather shoeing a horse. This last print was only small and, for many years, I thought it had been thrown away, until we cleared my aunt's cottage. I found it lying on a shelf in the under-stairs cupboard; it was originally a calendar and the original picture was by Sir Edwin Landseer.

It was in the kitchen that, for as long as I can remember, everyone came for morning tea; Ivy and her mother Mrs. Painting and Lou Townsend with her mother Mrs. Field. Lou usually sat in the chair that stood between the dresser and the table with the others sitting along the wall behind the door. Sometimes Gran would pull the chairs away from the wall so that I could get behind them and I would pretend I was running a shop just like my father.

I am usually no good at remembering jokes but I do remember Lou sitting in her chair in Gran's kitchen and telling what to me was a very rude joke, of course by today's standards it was quite mild.

‘A young mouse came back home soaked to the skin, “Whatever happened?” asked his brother. “Well I found this swimming pool with a white surround and I thought as it was such a nice day I would go for a swim. I hadn’t been there two minutes when it all went black and I couldn’t see a thing. Then it started to pour with rain and thunder like I have never heard before and the wind was terrible. It caused huge waves and if someone hadn’t thrown a log in for me to cling to I would surely have drowned.”

The right-hand door led into the front room and, standing in the middle of the room, was the round dining table that had come from Mark Bishop. The table was covered with a heavy mauve cloth and on the table always stood a pot with a cyclamen plant in it. To the left of the door was an oak sideboard where Joe’s fishing cups stood and above this were two prints of WWI ships doing battle in a storm. I was always afraid of those pictures as a small boy. In the corner of the room was the door for the under-stairs cupboard and to the right of that stood the grandfather clock. The clock had been made in Wallingford by Paynes’ in the late 1800’s and, before it was eventually sold, Freddie Parks had to saw the top finials off so that it could stand in his and Lizzies own sitting room. Further along the same wall was the door to the staircase and, set into the wall at the bottom of the stairs, a deep recess, covered with a curtain, where an old windup gramophone was housed along with two or three large boxes of old ‘78’ records.

On the wall opposite the door was the fireplace, above which was a large and ornate mahogany over-mantle; either side of a central mirror there were three tiered shelves held up with turned columns. On the mantelpiece stood two brown and white Staffordshire china dogs and two ‘candy twist’ candlesticks. To the right of the chimneybreast was a secretaire upon which stood a blue vase containing two dried bulrushes. Standing next to the vase was a disarmed WWI hand-grenade on a wooden plinth and on the wall above was a large and rather gloomy picture of hussars on horseback entitled ‘The Scouts.’ The wall to the right of the door was where the window was located, on the windowsill stood a brass bowl that contained a flowerpot with an African Violet plant in it. Finally, between the door and the right-hand wall stood Uncle Mark’s walnut display cabinet.

Going through the door in the far corner the stairs lead up to the two bedrooms. There was a small leaded-light set high in the left-hand wall to illuminate the stair well. The main bedroom on the left had a rather fine chaise lounge standing against the stair wall. The bed was a fine brass and iron double bed, on one side of which stood a chair while on the other was a small cupboard. In the far corner of the room, and to the right side of the small fireplace, stood a dressing table with a small mahogany framed mirror standing on top.

The door to the second bedroom was immediately in front on reaching the top of the stairs. Going through the door, a single iron bedstead stood lengthways along the wall straight in front while a second stood to the far left hand side of the room under the small window. The only other piece of furniture in the room was an oak commode.

Cottages 2a and 2b were essentially mirror images of each other, excepting that 2a had a cellar under the kitchen. I remember when the cottage was being modernized, and the cellar was going to be filled in, I went down to have a look at the most spectacular dry-rot fungus. All of one wall was covered in a vast mauve and orange growth with what appeared to be white cotton threads hanging from it. The cellar was filled not only with rubble but also an old bike and various items from Gran’s old house, including her double bed.

Both of these cottages were smaller versions of No1 in that they were two-up two-down with the bedrooms leading one off the other. The front door opened into the sitting room and both houses had movable screens to stop some of the draught, as the doors were ill fitting. As a boy I remember Uncle Ern kept the leather strop that he sharpened his cutthroat razor on hanging from a nail on the kitchen doorframe. I used to wonder how a piece of leather could keep something like a razor sharp enough to shave with.

Ern used to have a large harmonium standing against the back wall in the sitting room; they later gave the instrument to us, and, for a while, Stephen and I drove Mum mad when we tried to play it. As we were both still small it meant one of us pumping the pedals while the other one hit the keys. It was quite a good quality piece as it was made with a bur-walnut veneer and had a dozen stops either side of the music holder.

In the end, Dad did one of his 'conversion jobs'; he took it apart, removed all the workings and converted it into a sideboard, which we kept for several years. Some earlier conversions included; wooden orange boxes that became a bookcase, a cheese crate that transformed into my bedside table and an old double-bed that became a two-seater settee for Stephen and I.

The two end cottages were the newest and, while downstairs there were just two rooms leading off a small entrance porch, upstairs there were three small bedrooms. One thing I have been told about No3 is that I apparently didn't like two paintings that hung on the wall in the sitting room. I said they were dark and scary and that when I was grown up I would buy two new ones; those paintings are still there! I do remember they had an upright Polyphon disc musical box and, like some many things in the 1960's it ended up on the dump. Which explains, no doubt, why today they can fetch thousands of pounds.

We moved away in 1961 and the big change to Birmingham Yard came in the mid 1960's when all of the land, including the old workshops, was sold to a development company. The cottages were all given bathrooms with hot and cold running water but at the cost of two or three hundred years of history being raised to the ground in a matter of weeks. Even the venerable old walnut tree was felled, but the toughest thing to remove was the air-raid shelter as it was built of foot thick concrete.



Birmingham Yard today, showing the new houses on the right

I remember thinking that I couldn't understand the fuss that my relatives were making about progress; of course, like so many people, I realized too late what the sixties in general had destroyed in our towns and villages. If it had happened just a few years later, the sheds and the tree at least would probably have been saved, even if all the gardens and washhouses had gone. Progress doesn't necessarily have to mean covering everything in bricks and concrete!

It's sad that so much of the character of old Benson has gone now; everything is so cramped and claustrophobic. Building new houses is one thing but shoehorning them in to every patch of spare earth does no one any favours. I wonder how many houses still have enough garden to grow a decent supply of vegetables to support a family.

On hearing some peoples' views on village life I'm surprised that the crows in the rookery on Oxford Road haven't been evicted. How people can move from a town and then complain about the church bells or the local cockerel is, I'm afraid, beyond me. Do I see the old times through 'rose coloured spectacles'? Possibly, but in many ways we were safer then and perhaps much happier making our own amusement. Yes, I for one would turn the clock back, just a little.