

Above the Flints

Childhood Memories of Chalfont St Giles

How much do we really remember from our childhood? I was thinking this while watching a TV programme in which Fern Britton was taken round Chalfont St Giles where, like me, she had lived as a child, and seeing the surprise on her face when she was told historical facts which she had never known about the village. And neither had I!

I now live in a village in east Hampshire and have taken an interest in the local history there – to the extent that I'm now assumed to be the fount of all historical knowledge even though I'm a 'newcomer' (only been there 45 years) – and the personal memories of those who grew up in the area are like gold-dust to someone like me trying to fit it all together. I'm constantly chivvying older residents to 'put it on paper' so that it's not lost – with mixed success. And, after watching the TV, it struck me that some local historian in south Buckinghamshire might be just as eager to hear from me. So, this is for you.

I was born on 3rd October 1942 in a wartime maternity unit in Gerrards Cross¹ – along Fulmer Road, or so I'm told. I was given the middle name Owen which was my mother's maiden name². My mother was living with her parents Albert ('Bert') and Elsie Owen at 'Fairways', Stylecroft Road, Chalfont St Giles. His work had moved out of London earlier in the War, relocating to Newlands Park, and they had found accommodation lodging at 'Fairways' – just a healthy walk across the fields for him each day.

My parents, Doreen and Leslie, were married at the Congregational Chapel in Chalfont St Giles on 8th April 1941. Dad's father was a Methodist minister, but I don't think either dad or mum were very religious in themselves, although mum became a Quaker in later life. Dad was serving in the RNVR (or 'wavy navy' as he called it). I'm told that I was conceived in a fold-up bed at Queensferry while he was on leave – does that make me Scottish? – sometimes one receives too much information, and sometimes not enough!



*My parents on holiday in Brittany in 1938.
He was 22 and she 18 years old at the time.
What ages would you have guessed?
I don't think 'teenagers' existed in those days.*

¹ I always feel this makes me look rather posh when asked my birthplace!

² I later found out that I should be neither Owen nor Smith, as on both sides of the family an ancestor had been illegitimate and taken their mother's surname. By rights, I should be John Welton Osbourne, which might come in handy as a pen name sometime.

I remember nothing of the War, other than looking up one day and seeing gliders being towed across the sky, three to a plane. I would have been too young for it to have been for D-Day, so perhaps for Arnhem? Or perhaps just an exercise. There was also a chip in the glass of the French windows which I was told later was caused by the 'doodlebug' which had come down and exploded some way away. But we had no air raids that I was aware of, and no shelter that I knew of.

At the end of the War, I now know that there was a famous squatters' take-over of Army huts at the Vache. I heard no mention of it in our house, then or later.

My grandparents had managed to buy 'Fairways' from the owner, and after the War decided to stay rather than go back to Ilford where they had come from. My mother had trained as a teacher before the War, and when my father was demobbed he decided to take a teacher training course himself. This was made easier as Newland Park was by then a Teacher Training College and he became one of the first students there under the Emergency Training Scheme – and, like my grandfather, he just had to walk across the fields to get there. My grandfather Bert, meanwhile, commuted to his office back in London by using the Metropolitan Line from Chalfont & Latimer station.

Stylecroft Road in those days was unmade, as was Kings Road, and such traffic as there was would make its way through the flints using the best course available. It was not uncommon for cars to pass on the 'wrong' side of the road as they made their way gingerly along, looking for the least hazardous route. Later, when I was a driver, I followed suit. Memorably, the local doctor at the time used to say that he chose to drive fast along these roads, as you skipped over the bumps! He was the same doctor who, when you said that doing something or other hurt, would reply: "Why do it then?"

There was street lighting of a sort – a single bulb on a telegraph pole every 50 yards or so. Hardly the stuff of suburbia, but the village where I live today still has no street lighting at all. In the 1940s there were no houses opposite 'Fairways' – these began to be built while I lived there – and I remember going over illicitly to see the progress after the builders had left each day. And now they're tunnelling HS2 underneath the road – times change!

The back gardens were long, stretching down the hill towards the properties in Kings Road, and my grandfather was keen on his gardening. I don't know if this was a talent he brought with him from Ilford, or if it was one which grew out of the 'dig for victory' slogan of the war years, but I remember rows of soft fruit and vegetables which I would 'scrump' in season. I also remember that his garden forks were worn down to stumps due to all the flints in the soil – and that the hard water in this chalky area quickly furred up the kettle. When I went on holiday to Devon once, I found the water there was so soft that it tasted like soap – and I didn't like it at all.

Before starting proper school, I remember going to Nursery School in a house ('Homing' I think) across the main road opposite Kings Road. The main thing I remember from there is learning how to write different lengths of note on a music stave from a picture book showing birds sitting on stave lines. Actually, quite useful.

My parents, being in the teaching profession, decided that they didn't like the headmaster of the local school in Chalfont St Giles (his name was Mr Groom, but I never really knew the specifics of their problem with him) and so I was enrolled at the primary school in Chenies, whose head teacher (Mrs Life, see <https://www.cheniesvillage.co.uk/emilie-life>) they preferred, and I took the 335 bus there and back every day.

I started there in January 1948, the first term after my 5th birthday, and find it incredible now to think that as a 5-year-old I walked by myself to the main road, crossed over and caught the bus to school – and back again at the end of the day. This was not considered unusual at the time. I remember there were fleets of yellow Wimpey lorries passing along the road (A413) on their way to construct ‘London Airport’, or Heathrow as we know it now. I was the only child travelling from Chalfont St Giles on that bus, although we picked up one or two others on the way along Nightingales Lane. Due to the bus timetable, we arrived early at school and had some time to wait before classes began. At the end of the day, I also had to wait for the bus home. We played on the village green until someone shouted ‘Windsor’ (the 335 went to Windsor) when we all rushed across the road to the bus stop. Occasionally we’d catch the earlier 336 to Little Chalfont and pop in a shop there – then catch the 335 as it came through. Sometimes we’d walk along the road (Cokes Lane) to see how many bus stops we could pass before the bus came.

For lunch, we walked up to Chenies Manor and ate in the large ground-floor room there (older children ate upstairs in the snooker room). Going to visit the Manor now it’s almost impossible to remember how it looked then, with a kitchen in the corner, rows of tables and benches, and the staff seated on a dais at the far end against a partition wall which now seems to have been removed. And we were never told of the historical significance of the house! In fact we learnt no local history at all.

What we did learn, boys and girls, was how to knit, how to do ‘blanket stitch’, and how to use raffia to make table mats out of cardboard milk tops. These were still the days of ‘make and mend’! Those cardboard milk tops were also handy for a game we called ‘high over’, in which we tried to flick them like frisbees over the school roof. The boys’ and girls’ playgrounds were separate, but in summer we were all allowed to mix in the ‘orchard’ – a field with one large tree in it and, at the top, a nettle patch which we used to make tracks through using pieces of corrugated iron to flatten them. Health & safety? – What’s that? Not so nice was the habit of the boys to pee through the slats above the urinal into the only boys’ seated loo. As a result, I never dared to poo at school, and remember one uncomfortable day going home on the bus with my pants full. Some memories stay with you for a long time!

In my last year at Chenies, the top class were taken to the cinema in Amersham to see a double bill: The Ascent of Everest and the Coronation of Elizabeth II. We were marched up to the main road to catch the 703 Green Line coach – but we missed it! I honestly can’t remember what happened then, but somehow we all got there and saw the films.



Chenies school top class of 1953 – I am second from left in the front row

On the way to school the bus would pass Chalfont & Latimer Station, and I would look across to see the Chesham 'puffer' in its siding, an old black tank engine pulling its brown wooden coaches on the Metropolitan Line spur from Chalfont to Chesham. Then one day – surprise – there was a Diesel train instead (Wikipedia says this was in October 1952 and the experiment only lasted two weeks, so I was lucky to catch it).

I was never an avid trainspotter, but I did occasionally get on my bike and go to Chalfont & Latimer Station to watch the trains go by, and in particular the 'Master Cutler' on its way from Sheffield to Marylebone at express speed – it seemed to dance along the track, almost swaying from side to side as it approached. I also went to Rickmansworth to watch from a footbridge as the electric locomotives coming out of Baker Street were replaced by steam engines for the haul to Aylesbury.

Speaking of transport, Chalfont St Giles was served by three London Transport Country bus services and two Green Line coach routes. The bus routes were the 305 (Gerrards Cross to Beaconsfield), 335 (Windsor to Watford) and 353 (Windsor to Berkhamsted), and the Green Lines 709 (Chesham to Godstone) and 710 (Amersham to Crawley). The 353 was the one that took us to the dentist in Amersham!³ His name was Mr Wege, a South African, and he didn't believe in numbing your gums with an injection – he would tuck a piece of cotton wool in the strings which drove the drill and told you to watch it go round as a distraction while he got to work painfully on your teeth. He put me off chewing toffees for life as he said it would pull my fillings out. He also advised us to use a foul-flavoured toothpaste called Amm-i-Dent, which contained Ammonia supposedly to neutralise the acid in your mouth. Yuk! I don't think it's on sale any longer.



Because I was 'bussed' out of the village to primary school, and then went on to board at the Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe for my secondary education, I never made any friends of my own age in the village – so my memories of Chalfont seem strangely remote. If I go back now I would never expect to meet anyone that I knew.

In my mind, the shops are as they were in the 1940s and 50s, and it's always a surprise to find they've changed when I visit. When I saw the film of 'Dad's Army' which was shot in the village in 1971, I know the 'bank' was really a pub and the 'butchers' wasn't the butchers – even though Warners is still there as a fine example of an old-style butcher's shop.

So, in my mind, a trip round the shops of my time would be as follows: starting on the right as you come down the hill from The Pheasant.

The Buckinghamshire Building Society (still there), and next to it I think a hairdressers (in the existing building and maybe something else – not sure), then a gap to the post office, which I believe was also the telephone exchange, then the greengrocer, then Cattell's the chemist (he lived in Stylecroft Road like us), then Stacey's Tea Rooms, then the National Provincial Bank. In a lodge house at the start of Stratton Chase Drive was the doctor's surgery. Then, after the road leading up to the Fox & Hounds and the Memorial Hall, was The Crown, Payne's the newsagent, and The Feathers. This was followed by the 'Reading Room', and I remember the installation of public toilets next to it, starkly labelled 'Men' and 'Women'.

³ Quite recently, on a visit to Brooklands Museum, I saw a 353 just as I remembered it (see photo), green livery and all, which took me back a bit.

Coming back down the High Street on the other side there was a dairy (though I don't remember going there) and I believe Carden's the builder had a yard there, then a baker and shortly after that Warners the butchers with its sawdust-covered floor and separate cash desk. I remember Harry Warner being a particular friend of my grandfather. Shortly after that was Allworthy's the newsagent and general supplier of sweets. Then after the church entrance came Nash's Stores, filling two if not three buildings. Round the backside of the village green was an ironmonger and the village petrol pump. Then came the Merlin's Cave and various buildings running up to the pond.⁴

The pond used to empty when the river (Misbourne) ran dry, as it so often did, and I remember our friend Mr Zwicky (of whom more later) was asked to instal a pumping system to keep it full.

Going up the hill from where we left off at the top end of the High Street, there was the Rectory behind its brick wall, then the lane up to the school and shortly after (opposite Milton's Cottage) a building set back which I know we visited from time to time, but I'm struggling to think what for: was it a dentist's, a barber's, a restaurant? – I wish I could remember. There was also a pub, the Milton's Head. Further up the hill, among houses, was the Congregational Chapel (where I was told my parents were married) now demolished, and the Methodist Church (erected 1900 and still there – and where the press report says my parents were married!). Further up and set back was Marjorie Plumb's house with an outbuilding on the roadside – this was where I had a holiday job during my time at university – Mr Zwicky (a Swiss gentleman) was a family friend and a scientist who ran a business from the outbuilding developing iodine-based disinfectants and water deionisation units. At the top of the hill, in the area known as 'Three Households', was the White Hart on the right and Uncle Tom's Cabin (now demolished) on the left. There was also a small parade of shops on the left, including a newsagent whose owner (I forget his name) lost his hearing after being involved in an explosion while setting up the village fireworks with my grandfather.

Speaking of my grandfather, Bert Owen – everyone in the village seemed to know him. Rather like my own situation in my current village, he arrived as an outsider but became very much part of the fabric of the village. In particular, he was involved with the running of the Memorial Hall, and I remember him in conversation with the one-armed caretaker, Jimmy Neville. He was also involved in the amateur dramatics there, as were my parents, but I was never part of it – I don't think they had a junior section. However, I was called in to play the 'hobby horse' when the Morris Dancers were on the village green – and I was also involved in 'chalking' for the annual 'pennies round the green' when people added to a line of pennies (the old sort) following a chalked line round the kerb of the village green. My grandfather had a car before we did, and when he drove back from the village he would always offer to give a lift to anyone elderly he saw walking up the hill to The Pheasant crossroads. After he died in 1965 my parents had a bench installed halfway up the hill in his memory – but last time I visited the village I noticed that it had disappeared. He played bowls at Gerrards Cross (and, I believe for Bucks) and was a Freemason – I didn't follow him in either of those activities. Grannie once said that she would have liked to have

⁴ I know I've missed a few, but these are the ones I remember having an interest in as a young lad.

played the drums in a band! My own grandson now does that, so maybe the urge just skipped a few generations.



My maternal grandparents, Elsie and Bert Owen on their Golden Wedding anniversary in 1963.

My family weren't ones for going out drinking, but even so I noticed the number of pubs in and around the village. I've already mentioned The Pheasant, Merlin's Cave, The Crown, The Feathers, The Fox & Hounds, The Milton's Head, The White Hart and Uncle Tom's Cabin. There was also the Ivy House along the road towards Amersham. I've been in most of them once or twice (memorably getting the first bull's eye of the New Year at darts in Uncle Tom's Cabin one year), but by the time my regular pub-going had begun my 'territory' had switched more towards Beaconsfield and High Wycombe.

I suppose I must mention Milton's Cottage. I don't think I ever visited it as a child, although we all knew that Milton had escaped here from the plague in London, finished writing Paradise Lost and then, due to the influence of Chalfont (of course), started to write Paradise Regained. I was more interested in the barn in the field next door where Tony Gutteridge kept a pet bear – I wonder how many people knew that!

In 1948 or 49 my parents were able to buy the house called 'Ridgemont' next door to 'Fairways', which was very convenient. My parents taught at various local schools. At this time they were teaching at Old Jobs School in Chalfont St Peter. Normally I'd get home and go next door to my grandparents at Fairways until my parents arrived home (we built a stairway between the two gardens), but sometimes I was asked to stay on the bus and get off at Gold Hill Common to walk up to the school and meet them there. Then we would come home together. I can't remember if they had a car by then, but I do remember them buying one from somebody in Gerrards Cross – I think it was a small Morris with a number

plate that had two letters and four numbers. My father couldn't work out how to get into reverse, and had to go round in a big loop back to the seller to ask how to do it.



*My sister Diana and me in the back garden of 'Ridgemont' in 1949.
Beyond the greenhouse you can just see 'Fairways' behind the hedge*

In May 1958 dad was appointed head at Holmer Green Secondary Modern School, having been teaching for a while at Germain Street, Chesham. I can't remember if mum was already teaching there, but certainly they were for some years head and deputy head at the same school – most unusual for a married couple, but it seemed to work to everybody's satisfaction. They were always frustrated at Bucks retaining the 11+ and still having Grammar Schools, but did the best they could for their pupils, timetabling individually in some cases. I recall large planning sheets covering the table during school holidays, and the hours they spent on them – and vowed I would never be a schoolteacher myself!

Mum eventually became head at Lowndes School, Chesham – a girls school – having failed to become head of a mixed school, which frustrated her. She retired from Lowndes (and from teaching) in 1980. Dad had retired from Holmer Green the previous year.

As I said, my family weren't particularly religious – there was no church-going, and I had never been baptised (which was almost a show-stopper with the Chalfont rector when I wanted to be married in his church) – but later, when my parents had moved to live in Jordans, my mother became an elder at the Quaker Meeting House there. I suppose it was a natural progression for one who had been on the CND Aldermaston peace march in 1958.

I lived for most of my childhood in 'Ridgemont'. When we moved in it had a garage tucked away at the back, and my parents got used to backing the car round the corner of the house to the front until they eventually had a more convenient garage built attached to the side of the house – which immediately stopped me from cycling like a mad thing round and round the house! We had no central heating, of course, which meant that the front room wasn't used most of the time – and my bedroom was heated by a paraffin stove which made a pretty pattern on the ceiling but didn't stop there being ice on the inside of the window on the coldest days. My father followed my grandfather in cultivating a fairly large vegetable patch, and we also had an orchard at the bottom of the garden (apple trees and a Victoria plum) which was fenced off to keep some chickens in. This was mainly for the eggs, but occasionally my father's sister, Auntie Olive, was called in to wring a poor bird's neck for the table. Olive was a spinster and had followed us to Bucks, working as matron's secretary at Amersham Hospital. I'm not sure how that qualified her for wringing chickens' necks!

My sister Diana was born in January 1947, again at a nursing home in Gerrards Cross, but not the same one as I was. It was that winter of great snowfalls, and I remember being taken by bus to see her and having to walk past what seemed like mountains of snow between the bus stop and the nursing home.

She eventually followed me to Chenies school and for about two years we travelled on the bus there together until I left to go to Grammar School. In those days everyone who passed the 11+ would ring the school bell once so the village of Chenies knew how many 'successes' the school had that year. I can only imagine what this did to deflate the confidence of those who had failed!

Again my parents decided not to send me to the 'logical' school, which would have been Dr Challoner's at Amersham, then still a mixed-sex school. Because they were both working they thought that I'd be better off going to boarding school, and they sent me to the Royal Grammar School (RGS) at High Wycombe which, though a regular Grammar School, had a small section of its pupils as boarders. This was not 'posh' boarding, and we mingled with the majority of pupils who were day boys – except at lunch time which, for us, was back in the boarding house.

Being a boarder at the RGS had several implications for me, some good, some less so. On the one hand, it taught me to be more independent and forced me to concentrate on school work, which I probably wouldn't have done so much if I'd been living at home; on the other hand, boarding at an all-boys school prevented me from learning how to socialise with the opposite sex and left me feeling a little awkward in this respect in later life. (My sister, on the other hand, was sent to a Quaker mixed-sex boarding school after she left Chenies – I often wonder how I would have taken to that.)

The other 'peculiarity' of the RGS was that they only played Rugby – there was no option to play soccer. Some said it was because they could get 30 boys out on a pitch instead of just 22 – cynics said it was to look 'posh'. Although we were not a Public School as such, the headmaster at the time (Mr Tucker) was on the Headmasters Conference of independent schools. However, the Rugby pitches came to be useful when the local American forces in High Wycombe wanted somewhere to play American football – and one day they invited Jayne Mansfield to be there. You should have seen Mr Tucker hurrying across the field to meet her!

One other outcome of my time at the RGS was being given a nickname which has stuck ever since. It was my maths teacher in the second year, Mr PL Jones (one of the many Welshmen teaching there – we gave him the nickname 'Pilgy') who decided that JO Smith should obviously be called 'Jo' – and so 'Jo' I have remained ever since, even to my family.

Rules for the boarders were fairly loose – we could pretty much come and go as we pleased so long as we did our scheduled homework and were back for meals. Because I was only 8 miles from home, I'd occasionally cycle through the lanes back to Chalfont at weekends for a short visit.

In 1954 a certain Ian Dury arrived as a boarder. He'd caught polio in a swimming pool earlier in life and walked with one leg in an iron brace – and he was allowed to ride his tricycle in the school grounds where our bicycles were banned! For some reason he called himself 'Severn'. He was a fairly fiery character, though most of us got on well enough with him. His biography is quite scathing about the school, but some of the things he says don't quite match my memories of the time. Although there was no hint of his later life, it was

the period when skiffle had just arrived and some of us would go across to the main school changing rooms of an evening to play music. I'm mentioned (though not by name) in Ian's book as the one who played a tea-chest bass. I also learnt my basic three chords on guitar, as we all did in those days. Ian played on a drum which he assured us was made with human skin! I wonder if he kept it to use with the Blockheads?



Me and Ian Dury at the RGS in 1954.

Also in the school at that time, though as a day boy, was Roger Scruton. I remember thinking of him as being a bit bumptious but never got to know him well.

My parents paid for me to take driving lessons while I was still at school, and bought me an old banger of a car when I passed my test in order to stop me buying a motor bike. This served me well for years, though the state of intoxication I was in when coming back from pubs is frightening to think about now. I remember walking into the Beech Tree at Hazelmere on my 18th birthday and being served my regular pint of mild-and-bitter without having to ask for it. Mild was a shilling a pint and bitter 1/2d in those days, and I always reckoned that I played my best darts between my second and fourth pints!

I never took to smoking. I was doing serious athletics training with Wycombe Phoenix Harriers (I was a sprinter) and thought that, after all that effort, it would be silly to waste the benefit. I did once buy a packet of 10 Senior Service (from a machine at Uxbridge tube station as I recall), but only smoked a couple of them before I quit.

In 1963, my grandparents moved into 'The Pippin', a bungalow in Kings Road, and we moved back to 'Fairways', selling 'Ridgemont' to Mr & Mrs Cave (who promptly renamed it 'Ridgemount' for some reason). By this time I was at Imperial College in London studying Chemical Engineering and only home during holidays. Unlike students of today, I could fit all my belongings onto the back seat of the car, and drove myself to the various digs I inhabited for three years in London. At one time I was sharing a 'penthouse' floor of a building at the less-fashionable end of Cheyne Walk with 5 others – only two of us were students, and it wasn't the most conducive place to get any college work done – particularly as one of the others was Richard Stilgoe, recently down from Cambridge and, as I recall, making a living playing piano in various pubs and clubs. Fortunately I got into a proper Hall of Residence for my final year or I'm sure I wouldn't have got a degree – it was only a 'pass' grade, but it

found me a job as a 'paper technologist' with Wiggins Teape, the papermakers, who had places near High Wycombe – convenient for living back at home. And so I found myself in 1964 working at Glory Mill (now demolished) in Wooburn Green, helping to make photographic paper.

By 1967, when the company had begun to use computers but found it had no programmers, I had transferred to their head office in London as a trainee computer programmer, and stayed more or less in the computer industry for the rest of my working life – but that's another story.

Me at my 80th birthday party in October 2022:

