

Early Life

This is the story of growing up in the 1930s on a farm on the North Downs in Kent.

I was born at home on the 4th December 1925. My generation of the family consisted of five children, all born within six and a half years. Ruth was the eldest, followed in quick succession by Rod, Marjorie, me and then Rene.



My Grandmother at Norheads Nest

Our journey to Norheads farm began with my paternal grandfather, William Stone. He was born in 1848 and married three times. His first wife was Flora Bullock, 12 years his junior. She died fairly young, leaving six children. He then married Flora's younger sister, Alice, in 1889, but she died two years later, leaving one child.

The Bullock family ran the The Angel pub at Islington and William became the victualler, having come from a family farm in Knowstone, Devon. He later ran the Queens Head in Green Street Green, and took on the tenancy of Norheads Farm in 1896¹.

After his second wife died, William Stone married Juliana, my grandmother. It seems he would have married Juliana earlier, but she had been nursing a sick brother for several years and would not leave Devon until he died. At the time of their marriage he was a licenced victualler living in Chelsham. My father was born in December 1894, and although he was the only surviving child from this last marriage he had seven half brothers and sisters.

¹ For a copy of the original lease, see Appendix 1.

My grandfather died before I knew him. His widow, my grandmother, lived in Norheads Nest, a bungalow on the farm built by my grandfather in the style of European buildings he'd seen in his travels. The design worked well. There was a big room in the middle and bedrooms on either side.

Because she was a widow my grandmother always wore black, with black stockings and boots and an enormous stuffed hat a la Queen Victoria. She was extremely religious and strict; the only thing she read on a Sunday was the Bible. Her stepdaughter Mary looked after her. Aunt Mary was a great knitter who could knit a pair of stockings in a day, using four needles and never looking at the work, even when doing cable stitch.

I'm not sure if Grandmother was eccentric or mean, but when a visitor was coming to stay she would put a candle in the room to air it. Occasionally I stayed there in the weird feather bed and never caught a cold, so it must have been OK.



Grandmother with Dot and Rene

My grandmother died in the cellar while sheltering from bombs during the war. As she died she said "Glorious Heaven". Aunt Mary continued to live at Norheads Nest until she died.

My father fought in the First World War, in the mud of Flanders. He didn't talk of it much, but what he did say was horrific.

He recalled how he daren't take his boots off because of the swelling caused by trench foot. Once removed, the boots would never go back on again. When he

was sleeping in the trenches rats would chew his ears to see whether he was alive. If there wasn't movement they would have eaten him. Lice were also a problem and he said the way to kill them was to turn your vest inside out and pop them off with a



My father and his parents

candle. Being on the front line toughened him, and he wasn't frightened of anyone or anything.

Part of his time in France was spent in charge of prisoners of war. These prisoners were short of food and the sentries would hand dogs through the wire for them to eat. In return the inmates would give out models of tanks made from shell cases. My father acquired three of these, but unfortunately on his death my stepmother had them, so now they are gone from the family. After he returned from the war he took over the farm from his father and got married.

One of my father's half brothers, Uncle Fred, lived by the main road in Biggin Hill. He had emigrated to Australia but came back to fight in the first world war. He married Auntie Grace who was a Plymouth Brethren.

Grace was very religious and used to lecture all over the country. She did not drive, but knew every bus, and all the timetables, by heart; there were a lot more buses in those days. Being Plymouth Brethren set them apart from the general community. This must have been hard on their only daughter Freddie, who appeared to be very withdrawn as a child.



Fred and Grace

The Plymouth Brethren used to come over to Biggin Hill to sing for the air force. You could hear them from a long way away.

My maternal grandmother and father were Laura and Harry Henwood. Grandfather was German, and changed his name from Heinrich Heinwood to Harry Henwood before the First World War. There was no question of him being anti-British, but you couldn't be too careful. There were three children from this marriage: Fred, Doll (Dorothy) and my mother, Elsie Laura.



My grandparents lived in 49 Bromley Road, Catford. When I was small we used to travel up to visit them in an Austin 16 that had been passed down. In the run-up to the war farming was depressed, but started getting better in the late 30s, so my father bought a new Austin 8 in 1938.

When we visited our grandparents I found it hard to sleep because the trams went right through the night. My mother's sister Doll lived in the house with our grandparents. She had consumption², and her bed was taken outside so she could get fresh air. The air was cleaner then than it is now, as trams didn't make much pollution.

Once when we were staying in Catford we had a visit from a mad great-aunt. She was convinced that all the electricity we were using was going into the earth, and that one day there would be a huge explosion!

My grandmother's aunt was a Miss Elizabeth Everest, who was Winston Churchill's governess. The family believes he gave her a watercolour, painted when he was about 15. We could never prove this, and later Sir Winston did not recognise it, so unfortunately instead of it being quite valuable it is worth practically nothing.

² Consumption, now known as tuberculosis or TB, is a bacterial infection spread through inhaling tiny droplets from the coughs or sneezes of an infected person. It mainly affects the lungs, but it can affect any part of the body, including the abdomen, glands, bones and nervous system. A vaccine for school children (the BCG) introduced in 1953, and the development of the antibiotic *streptomycin* in 1948, has meant that TB is now no longer the killer it once was.



Doll, Elsie and Fred



Elsie, Fred and Doll

My mother was the youngest of three siblings, all of whom were to die young. She loved dogs, and was a talented musician. However she was always ill, because she had too many children; five and a miscarriage in seven years. During my childhood she was usually in bed, but on odd occasions when she was well enough she would come downstairs and play piano and we would all sing together.

My mother's brother Fred was an architect and quite a reasonable artist. Whenever he came to visit, he would always ask for jam and clotted cream. He was keen on catching butterflies and collecting bird's eggs. He married a lady called Doe (another Dorothy).

Fred used to visit occasionally with his wife and little dog, which was some sort of terrier. He brought his dog one day and as soon as it was let out of the car our dog Taffy, a fearsome black and tan Welsh collie, went for it and dragged it yelping all the way out of the yard. This was the last occasion this dog was brought to the farm and we didn't see so much of Aunt Doe after this as she was, to put it mildly, somewhat upset.

Fred fought in the trenches in the First World War and was saved by his pocket watch, which was struck by a bullet. Unfortunately Fred suffered from gas inhalation in the first world war. He could do



plenty of things - he used to design aerodromes and his work took him all over the country - but because of his damaged lungs he was unable to run and was low on energy.

Being saved by his pocket watch wasn't Fred's only brush with death. In the second world war he was in Suffolk driving to visit an aerodrome he had designed when he heard a booming sound. He looked in his rear view mirror. Behind him the road was exploding and a German bomber was closing in on him. He realised that the bomber was targeting the road, so pulled in to the side. A few seconds later there was an almighty explosion as the road ahead of him was blown up, just where he would have been had he not stopped.



A family holiday with parents, grandparents, Doll, Fred and a great aunt and uncle

In 1942 he was persuaded to have an operation to repair his damaged lungs. The surgeon told him "This will make a new man of you." He died on the operating table, aged 49. He said to my

Mother "If I die your children will be well off." I don't know what happened, but we never got a penny.

My mother's elder sister Doll, or Dorothy, died in 1936 from consumption. My mother, Elsie, had kidney trouble for years and died in 1939 just after the outbreak of war. It must have been hard on Grandmother to outlive her three children.

Before Doll died we went on a seaside holiday with my grandparents to Brighton. It never rained!



When I was about five or six I had a little patch of garden and I had a primrose plant that had 500 blooms on it. It was unbelievable. So I dug it up and gave it to Doll, because I knew she was poorly. I was eleven when Doll died.

My grandfather died not long after the second world war. They came to stay with us to get away from the London bombing, but in the end we had far more bombs at Biggin Hill than they did! They were lucky as their house remained intact. My grandfather was a builder and had inherited twelve London houses. However these houses were all flattened during the war and no compensation found its way to the family, so that was the end of that