# AN OXFORDSHIRE CHILDHOOD

Gillian Mackie[1]

This and other Mackie family memoirs may be found at https://sites.google.com/view/mackiefamily/home. Contact: mackie.geo_at_gmail.com

## 1.IFFLEY.

Our grandparents lived on Church Way, the loop of road right in front of the old Norman church of Iffley. Their house, which they called Avenham, was subsequently re-named Rick House, because it was built on the site of the cottages in the rickyard of an old farm. This may well have been the White family farm, as the parents of our grandmother Lily White lived in the adjacent house in their old age, and quite likely before this as well. This house is known to have been a farm-house. I was told as a child that the White family had "always" farmed in Iffley. I have always believed that Grandpa designed Avenham, which is an Italianate brick villa, and that he was an architect or landscape designer. Pat though says he worked for the Thames Conservancy & it was his father, in Lancashire, who followed this profession, and the name Avenham was taken from a park he had designed in Lancashire. It appears that Grandpa, George Edward Rowbotham, who was at school at St.Peter's, York, had done a year of studies in architecture before he came south in the 1890's and never went back. His drawing of Avenham on the right dates from about 1912 and is from Aunty Alice's autograph book, which was discovered by Ken Hunnisett in a second-hand shop! Ken says the house still exists as No 101 Church Way.


Grandpa cut his ties with his family in Preston, or rather they disowned him. He stayed in Iffley because he met & fell in love with our Granny, Mary Elizabeth White, known as Lily. This was considered a mésalliance by his family, but he married her anyway, and to our knowledge they were a happy and devoted couple, in spite of a certain garrulousness in Grandpa which made him force visitors to sit up late into the night while he talked on & on, refusing to let them go to bed. Towards the end of their lives, Granny's parents lived next door on Church Way, on the Iffley Turn side (away from the church), in a house called The Red House. They had handed over the running of the farm to their son Willie. During our childhood, the Percivals lived at the Red House, they had an Old English Sheep Dog called Bob: Thomas, my stepfather, says he remembers this dog and that one couldn't tell his front end from his back. I vaguely remember Bob lying in the Percival's driveway, but my memories of the great grandparents are completely gone, and indeed

[1] Gillian died on Sept 17 2021. George Mackie added the illustrations.

they may well have died before I was born. Later in our childhood Granny's brother, Willie, farmed at Wood Farm, Headington, which belonged to St. John's College, & is now the site of a housing estate. Granny had another brother, Sam, who died in infancy & was buried with his parents in the old churchyard at Iffley, under a group of dark evergreens behind the chancel: there was a mystery about this child...perhaps he was retarded, a shameful condition in those days. Other members of the White family are buried in Thame churchyard. Grandpa Rowbotham had a sister, Aunt Felicia, and we were often told about her, but I do not remember meeting her: she was said to have been rather a severe & humourless person. Perhaps she was at one of the Christmas get-togethers at Avenham, which I vaguely remember, mainly because grown-ups sat at the big table and drank wine & pulled crackers and the smaller children sat at their own little table.

Pat (Patsy, then) & I were the only children of the family, and just over 3 years apart in age. Our lives in the village centred around the church and the lock. On Sundays we accompanied Granny to church, and the incredible tedium of Matins & the sermon was whiled away by our study of the plaques on the walls, which included the Boer War Memorial, and the Table of Prohibited Relationships "... a man may not marry with .. his grandmother; his deceased wife's sister,", etc. We also got the treat of pumping the organ, sitting in the little half-pew behind it for the purpose. We threw ourselves gladly into this task. All was not bad about the church service, though. Pat loved to sing the canticles, especially "O all ye Works of the Lord, Bless ye the Lord, Praise Him & Magnify Him for Ever", which went on to define a long, long list of these Works individually! I liked the hymn which asked "Can a Mother's Tender Care, Cease toward The Child She-Bear" and Pat waited all through the service to hear "And Thou, Child (ie Pat herself) Shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest for Thou shalt go before the Face of the Lord to Prepare His Ways". Pat reminds me how good the Sunday dinners smelled as one returned from church to Avenham. We both recollect the great old yew tree in the churchyard, where there was a big hollow a little way up in between the two main trunks: this tree, now half dead & gone, is reputed to be one of the oldest in England, at around a thousand years. We were always told it had supplied some of the long-bows for the Battle of Agincourt, 1314. It was in this yew cavity that we spent hours playing and telling stories. The graveyard then had graves dating back to the seventeenth century, now uprooted for easy maintenance. We also frequented the rectory, where Mr Clarendon held sway. His daughter Audrey was my godmother, as well as Vera's closest friend. It was she who chose the name Gillian at the font, during the secret christening my mother staged in retaliation for my father's naming me Wendy (a name suitable only for a cow, according to Vera) on the birth certificate. They had vetoed each others' first choices, Bridget & Pamela, & were at an impasse. The rectory, of Elizabethan vintage, boasted a priests' hole in the chimney and a secret passage to Littlemore in the cellars. It also had an ancient mulberry tree, dating back to 1600, in the centre of the garden. This tree dripped with squishy fruit, ideal for Summer Pudding. Mr Clarendon's Old English sheepdog Face hid his personality behind a thatch of matted forelock but he was rather a craven dog: I remember how scared he was to walk across the river bridges, where he feared falling through the narrow spaces between the planks. The way down to the lock passed Mr Collicut's little kiosk on the right where we could spend our penny a week pocket money on sweets. I liked fizzy sherbet best at 2 rolls for a penny: Pat also remembers smarties, counting them out for extra value. Mr Collicot had a wooden leg. His job was to collect the tolls for the lock. At the bottom of this lane was the site of Iffley Mill, of which only a couple of millstones remained, as it had burned down in 1904, according to a plaque. My mother, who was secretive

about her age, once let slip that this event happened the year she was born, making her birth date the 2nd of October, 1904: this date was also confirmed by Thomas. She was the youngest of the 3 children of the family, and would have been an improbable 114 years old this year!

Around the corner at the bottom of the path was the weir. We spent many hours gazing down at the water under our feet, as it rushed through the narrow channels into the foaming millrace at the foot of the rectory garden. Our cousins Duncan & Bruce used to take a boat through there with both their dog Crackley and Patsy aboard. Once they capsized in that foaming water, though Pat says they were not upraided for this. I was too young to be along. Beyond the weir was the family island, leased, I believe, from Magdalen College. It was a tiny circular place, ringed and held together by giant poplar trees, fenced & gated and visible in some of the old family photos. It has totally washed away sometime in the last 50 years, presumably the trees fell or were cut down, and without them there was nothing to hold the soil in place. Beyond the island was Iffley Lock itself, which was parallel to the old mill-race. If we were lucky we could help the lock-keeper, Mr Beazley, push the long bars that opened the lock gates & watch the water swish out & the level fall. And we could always shake the nose ring of a bronze bull which was set into the wall down there. Beyond the lock on the left was a gentle little bay where the water was shallow and we fished for minnows. I was rather a timid child who took all the reiterated warnings of my adults seriously. Consequently I was always a bit scared of the millrace behind us with its sign DANGER in mid stream on a high post. I feel uneasy about this place to the present day, even writing about it! Pat, I may say, was bolder, & up to all sorts of pranks, when she wasn't reading books in trees, or handing around cakes at tea-parties. But perhaps she was just older. Perhaps she was under the influence of our Rowbotham cousins, who had returned from their adventures in New Zealand. The dangers of the many channels of the river Thames at Iffley were underlined by the fact that our cousin Jack White had been drowned in the lock many years before, at the age of 21. The lock gates were open when he tried to walk across on his return from the down-river pub one dark November night. He is said to have surfaced beneath the landing stage and drowned. I suppose he'd had one too many, though we were never told any details. He was one of my mother's generation, her cousin on her mother's side: a Wood-Farm White. There were 9 children in that family, Jack, Tom, Dick, Harry, Girlie (my Godmother), Margaret (later wife of Sandy Wigmore who died of TB sometime in the 1940s: their daughter Peggy was bridesmaid at our parents' wedding), Betty and Josephine, not necessarily in that order, though Josephine was definitely the youngest, and Margaret perhaps the oldest. (Uncle Lad gave the order as Margaret, Elsie, Tom, Lillian, Jack, Dick, Harry, Betty, Jo.)

Our parents started their married life in another house on Church Way, Court Farm House. It was an old stone house right opposite the church gate, & the oldest & prettiest house on Church Way. Their wedding was in 1923. Vera was 18, Roland (Ronnie) Faulkner, 31. He was a school-friend of her brother, George Vallance (Lad) Rowbotham. Ronnie had won a scholarship to read English at Pembroke College, Oxford, gone up for a year in 1913, and left to join up in 1914. Pat

thinks he won some national prize in English at that time. He was caught up in some battle in the Ypres salient, took over the batallion and was wounded and decorated. On his recovery, he was seconded to India, where he initially joined the Sind Horse, but at 6 ft.4 ins was too tall for the cavalry, & eventually landed up in the 6th Ghurkas. The romance & action of military life on the North-West Frontier captivated him, & he never returned to the University. He took part in the Mesopotamian wars, and won the MC (or was this when he was in France?). In my earliest childhood he regaled us with stories from India: of pig-sticking and polo, of tent-pegging and of eating with his Ghurka men, learning to belch to order as politeness required. By contrast, my mother was only just out of the schoolroom. She was a music student, working on her LRAM, with only her theory and composition to complete. Her piano teacher was a Mr. Allchin. At the time of her marriage she had just graduated from the Girls' Public Day School Trust Oxford High School for Girls. She never finished her music degree, but took up painting and studied at the Ruskin School of Art.

It seems amazing that my mother never joined Ronnie in India. Several times she was packed to go, but ill-health intervened. She had a still-born son as well as at least one miscarriage, & it was not until 1928 that her first surviving child, Patricia Elizabeth, was born, in Iffley. No doubt Vera's failure ever to get to India was also the result of living about 3 minutes walk from her over-protective mother, who didn't want to lose her youngest child, and is said to have opposed her early marriage, though she is also said to have insisted on it because she "caught them cuddling". I do remember being shown Vera's trunk of linens & household goods under the bed in her little room behind the stairs at Avenham, but this must have been after 1936, in another period when she had no home of her own, and had all her worldly goods packed up ready to move. I was definitely told that the trunk was her India things. How sad that she never went. She would have loved this adventure. I only vaguely remember Court Farm House, though I remember being told the bathroom was in a separate building so whatever the weather one had to go outside to go there, using an umbrella if necessary. We don't really know when Daddy's parents built them their own house, Old Nans, at the intersection of Church Way and Abberbury Road. Certainly it must have been after Daddy came home from India for good under something of a cloud. This was probably around 1930, before my birth in 1931. Pat thinks he may have been having an affair with an Indian woman. I always thought he had seduced the colonel's wife. Both these romantic notions may have been something of a whitewash, appearances being very important in those days. Another version has him riding a motor-bike into the Officer's Mess, while yet another, and perhaps the true one, insists that it was his drinking problem that led him to resign, with a little encouragement from his senior officer. We will probably never know the real story. Anyway, this house is the real start of memory for us both. It was from here that I went out adventuring with my bike up Abberbury Road when I was 4 or so & met the Wings, who lived at the top of the hill. Antony & I became fast friends, as did our mothers. Iffley was expanding, & these were some of the new areas of the village put up between the wars. It was up here too that Vera's friends the Mitsuis lived. She always said later that they must have been involved in pre-war espionage, but at the time they were good friends, and we played with Naioko and Yuri. Pat can remember all sorts of other neighbours & friends in the village. I'm limited to fewer. Audrey Clarendon, now Bruce, & her husband & daughter Clare, were back from India & the mission field. Clare thought she was a "little princess" as she'd been treated as one in India. We thought she was an odious child. But this must have been later than the Old Nans days. I have a memory of an old man with

a briar walking stick, its handle a gnarled root. I think he sat on our corner, could it have been that he had been dispossessed by the building of Old Nans which involved tearing down some old cottages, or had he lived where Abberbury Road now took off up the hill?

*Patsy and Gilli*

Iffley in those days had 3 shops and 2 farms, where Pat & I used to swing on the gate as we waited for the cows to come in to be milked. Granny, to teach us caution, I suppose, told us that each cow with a crumpled horn had tossed somebody. The nearest shop was between home and the first farmyard. It sold fatty-cake, a gigantic, cake-sized flat bun made with lard & currants, iced and delicious. Sometimes Granny would send us to buy one for tea. The Village Shop was further away on the other side of the road, & was a general store & newsagents. It was almost opposite Iffley's pub, "The Tree", which was behind the giant elm in the centre of the village. Beyond again was Donnington Lane where one went past the other farm gate. There in bare feet & Liberty dresses we swung on the gate & went on down to the water-meadows by the millrace where fritillaries bloomed thick in spring. Here too we skated in the wintertime, & here as well Granny had skated in the distant days when the Thames froze so solidly in winter that a coach and horses could cross the river on the ice. Our lives at this early stage were bounded by the nursery, where first Clara, and then Kathleen presided. Clara met her comeuppance when she let Pat's pram roll dangerously down towards the sea on some holiday outing just as our parents were passing: she was flirting with a boyfriend. Kathleen was a lovely & kind young country woman from the Burford area, who afterwards married an airforce officer, & kept in touch with us for many years. At teatime we were dressed in clean clothes and taken down to the drawing room. But Vera did not confine herself to this teatime visit, and I have early memories of going for walks with her along the towpath, her long strides exhausting our short legs. We would run ahead and swing on the gates to rest while she caught up. She was often carrying her painting bag & easel, ready to do a sketch. Kathleen also took us -me- for walks, in the pram, & I well remember losing my adored Flopsy on one such occasion, on a mean little street between the Iffley & Cowley roads, Temple Street. I discovered she was missing from the pram. I never saw her again. We retraced the path, but without success. They bought me another stuffed rabbit but she was never quite the same. Unlike Pat, I didn't like dolls. I liked stuffed animals, though I don't think I ever had a teddy. They did give me a baby doll called Christopher, which I kept in its box and rarely played with, though it was dressed beautifully in 3 layers of petticoats, all hand-made. I also got a black doll in my stocking one Christmas, when we were at Ringwood, in the New Forest, where Daddy went to fish. I didn't like it very much, in fact it was a bitter disappointment, even if ideologically correct.

Pat had a special doll, Fairy. She was German & had a china bisque head and blue eyes that opened & shut and real blonde hair that turned out at the ends and a fringe. Fairy and Flopsy inhabited an imaginary land where everyone spoke with squeaky voices, as did we when we impersonated them & their voices after lights out when we were meant to be asleep. Their adventures would fill a whole book by themselves, but alas were never written down & have vanished without a trace. I expect we needed this amusement after lights because we were tied to a rigid bedtime winter & summer. It was six o'clock, & outside the curtained windows it would be light with insects buzzing over the mown hay.

There was one foreign interlude in the midst of the Iffley period, the removal of our parents to a house on the Woodstock road, no. 253. It was convenient for Greycotes school, where I joined Pat at the age of 5, presumably in 1936. I sense this move to have taken place in the summer, just before I started school. We have scant memories of the house, more of the garden, which was divided into 3 sections, from the house back. At the very back was an industrial pond, which separated it from the Pressed Steel Works, rather an anomaly in a middle class neighborhood. The pond was surrounded by bare earth banks and no attempt was made to garden here. I remember seeing my first lizard sunning itself there, and also that I kept wood-bugs in tins at this time. As for the house, I remember loving the jade green curtains at the window on the stairs, which were thickly scattered with daisies. There was a glass case in the hall which contained a stuffed pike: Daddy's trophy from the Thames & presumably the largest caught of its year, as I know he was inordinately proud of achieving this feat one time. But which year? Vera hated fishing and everything connected with it. She found it boring, and hated it that the fishes landed up dead.

*Fisherman's daughter*

Both Pat & I remember a horrendous row, perhaps the parents' last before the final split-up. It took place in the big living room that faced the garden, and Pat remembers that she hid all the knives in the house, she was so scared it would come to a physical fight. I seem to remember Kathleen coming to get me and taking me upstairs. This was the end of their marriage, they never lived together again, though they didn't get divorced until 1947, as Vera was unable to bring herself to divorce a serving soldier during the war. In those days, divorce was far from private, and involved the washing of a lot of dirty linen in public in court, an ordeal for all concerned, and was really a last resort, agreed to reluctantly. Apparently, Daddy never got over the separation and loss of his family, and only remarried late in life. Vera, however, married Thomas in 1947, and went with him to live in Africa.

Our world as a nuclear family finally came to an end with our return to Granny's care at Avenham, while Vera found a job helping a forestry professor, Mr. Beeston, with a book he was writing. He lived at Eynsham, and since she didn't have a car, she stayed there during the week, only returning to Iffley on the weekends. To all intents & purposes we were brought up for the next 4 years by our grandmother, Grandpa having died sometime in the intervening period, perhaps in 1933. (Feb 6, 1934, according to his gravestone) Granny was aided in this task by Aunt Jane, her aunt by marriage, widow of her uncle Albert White. She was a tiny hunch-back woman, who told us that she had been crippled by carrying pails of water from the well on a heavy wooden yoke when she was a child in the 1860s. She lived along the village in a little cottage, and kept hens behind the village hall. Later, perhaps after her husband died, she lived in the little upstairs back room at Avenham.


The two windows facing the street at Avenham were the dining and drawing rooms. At the end of the passage facing the front door was the kitchen with its ever-burning hob, where tea stewed in the pot all day until it was dark brown like the teapot itself. Behind that was the scullery, with its shallow yellow stoneware sink, where washing up was done and vegetables were prepared in the winter, when the weather wasn't nice enough to do them outside. The scullery was in a wing of the house that went back into the garden. Behind it again was a workshop, complete with vise, then the outdoor lavatory, & finally the rickety wooden stairs up to Aunt Jane's tiny room. Both Pat & I loved this outdoor toilet for its toilet paper. Izal paper was stiff & nonabsorbant & smelt of disinfectant. But it was blessed every few sheets with a piece of doggerel which we collected with great enthusiasm. One of them: "Grandmother, Grandmother Grey, can we go out to play? I'll come back to scrub in an Izal tub, to keep the germs away", has stuck in Pat's memory all these years. Actually, the outside john was a horrid, cobwebby place with few other claims to be remembered.

Pat remembers playing "Doctor" in the laburnum tree with Antony & me & says we made her cavort around without her panties in the front garden. She was exceptionally good at doing handstands and cartwheels, unlike me. To her horror, a row of village children were peering through the hedge! I expect this interest in the medical profession dates to the period when Antony & I had just got back from our long 3 weeks in the Fever Hospital, where we were incarcerated in the spring of 1936 with diphtheria throats. This isolation without toys or reading materials was very hard. Luckily for me Antony's baby brother Graham was also in there and kept Antony awake by crying at night, so they decided Antony would do better sharing a room with me. It was really the operating theatre, though no operations took place when we were there. We were behind glass, literally. We could see through huge plate glass windows in each direction into a long line of other

rooms, and everyone else could see us. Our parents came & waved to us through the glass. Helen Wing always brought presents, even though anything we had would have to be abandoned or autoclaved to sterilise it before we left the hospital. One day they brought me barley sugar caramels, but I was made to share them with the whole hospital & so only got one. Another day the hospital brought me an alphabet book. I was disgusted as I could already read. I wonder why Vera didn't bring me some books, it was so boring there, though it was a lot better after Antony moved in with me. The only other thing I remember clearly about this place was the oranges. At home we got them peeled for us, and divided into sections. Here, though, they cut the oranges up into pieces with a sharp knife right through the skin, and we had to chew them with the juice running down our chins and over our hands, and the bitter peel making our lips smart. I found it very difficult to bring myself to do this.

After the eternity at the hospital, I returned to Avenham one spring day, I think it was March. I remember so well the spring flowers had come out in the time we were away. Daffodils and Star-of-Bethlehem were in bloom in the flowerbeds by the front door. My memory of this homecoming is still as vivid as if it were yesterday.

Around this time I remember also going out at night in the car to see the fireworks and lights of the Silver Jubilee of George V in 1936. Just being out at night instead of being home in bed was exciting in itself. Another time we went to Southampton by car & saw the liners Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary lying side by side in the dock there. This must have been sometime around 1938-1939, the occasion must have been the launching of the Queen Elizabeth, and therefore after the abdication of Edward VIII in 1937.

Food was a great bone of contention in my childhood, in fact it was the major problem of my early life. I was a picky eater and only really enjoyed Bird's custard, though I added raspberry jam to the accepted foods when Vera's friend Thomas (Sir Thomas Tom of Appledore the knight whose armour didn't squeak) brought me a jar & coaxed me to eat it. I did not like curry, a staple food at 253, served to remind Ronnie of India on a daily basis. I therefore lived on plates of plain unadorned white rice. When we moved back to Granny's, I infuriated her by refusing her mince, which I thought had toenails in it. I also hated anything stewed that had floating lumps in it. I called the lumps hockets. I infuriated Mummy as well. They were all at their wits end. I can well remember having my nose held while they forced a tomato down my throat, me gagging the while. I can also remember only too well sitting for hours after every meal in front of my plate of congealed food, which I had refused to eat. The battle of wills would continue at the next meal, when the same food came back again, and again, and again. At 253 Woodstock Road, also, the same battle took place. I threw, with Pat's connivance, the hockets out of the stewed rhubarb into the flowerbed below the dining-room window. Oh the guilt when I was congratulated at having "eaten up"! My mother told me of her worry when she returned from Eynsham to find me sitting at breakfast with a wall of cornflakes boxes ("Force", actually), around my plate, to protect me from having to look at the marmalade! The same problems and penalties continued at Greycotes, where we stayed for lunch, and where the onion bits in the mince were especially toe-nail like, and the mince was also full of gristle. I remember Lotty, the cook, also made me sit & look at this congealing food. Evidently it was the standard treatment for the eating-problem child, & not intended as cruelty, or possibly the school was carrying out instructions from home. (My

experience was by no means unique: Michele Roberts writes "Diana Cooper provides one devastating example of the cruelty of the traditional upper-class upbringing that was dished out by nannies: "poor Letty, like so many children, while not dainty, could not swallow her food. Round and round it went in her mouth, colder and more congealed grew the mutton fat, further away receded the promised pudding, and very often I saw her unfinished plate put cold into the cupboard for tea"). On the other hand, Pat liked food, especially Granny's treacle tart, and her marvelous cheese straws, which smelled amazingly good, and were also to be found at Wood Farm. At Granny's we had lots of stewed apples, which Aunt Jane made from the Bramleys in the garden. Unfortunately for me, she didn't manage to get the whole core out, with the result that the apple-sauce too was filled with toe-nails, as far as I was concerned.

Granny was, according to Pat, one of the most superstitious people she had ever met. No ladders were walked under, no pins left on the floor, no salt was spilt without a sample of it being thrown over the left shoulder, and these were superstitions which my mother also followed all her life. To both of them, an owl's hooting foretold a death, crossed knives would surely lead to a quarrel and there were numerous other things which would prove unlucky. Luck, though, attended those who bowed three times to the new moon, provided that they jangled the coins in their pockets and that they were in the open air. The luck was cancelled out if one saw the new moon through glass. I still feel cheated if I notice the new moon through a window or the windshield. Luck also attended us if "white rabbits" were the first words we said on the first day of any month. It was surprisingly hard to remember to do this, however assiduously we reminded each other the night before. Even more mysterious was Granny's belief that spitting counteracted bad smells. Pat was always made to spit at the bottom of Donnington Lane below the farmyard, which one passed to get to the water-meadows. The smell there was disgusting, whether it was bad drains or farmyard effluent. Pat and I entered into this spirit of magic and superstition ourselves. How else to explain Pat's leaving thimbles filled with spit on all the windowsills of the house? She got blamed for this but never owned up. Did they think I had done it? I have no recollection of this curious incident at all, though I do remember filling a tiny dolls' chest of drawers with chewed up butter and sugar. Was I also in the grip of the magical forces which attended every Oxfordshire childhood?

Some of these superstitions also had a large element of folk-medicine in them: cures and remedies handed down from woman to woman for all time. For example, warts were treated by rubbing with the cut end of a hazel twig: the twig was then to be flushed down the lavatory. (What did they do before the invention of the WC?) Granny was also afflicted with Victorian puritanism. In her mental world, piano legs still wore trousers. Mention of any part of the body proper, trunk, was strictly forbidden, and even the word "body" had impure connotations in her view. It had been difficult for her, as for many Victorians, to endure a name ending in "bottom", hence the ending "botham" was substituted by most people who had these unfortunate & rude names. It was difficult for us to find ways to get around Granny's edicts, especially as it was impossible to know what it was all about, since we knew absolutely nothing about the facts of life. This must have been the intention! It was sad, though, that Granny's modesty, which had made her proud never to have seen a doctor since Vera was born, caused her to neglect the symptoms of breast cancer entirely, until it had spread to her spine and become inoperable. She died in 1940 at the age of 66 at Aunty Alice's, who nursed her devotedly at the end. Alice told Pat that Granny's last words were "I'm coming, George". Then she died. It is especially sad to record that Alice, also, died of breast

cancer in very much the same circumstances in 1964. My last definite memories of Granny are from September 1939, when war was declared, and she, knowing by experience that rationing would soon follow, told us children that we henceforth would not be allowed sugar in our tea, nor to have both butter and jam on the same slice of bread or toast.

At the time, & for years afterwards, it never occurred to me that it was a real imposition on Granny to have us to look after at the end of her life, but now I am that age, with less energy than when I was young, I can imagine what a drain on her it must have been. Of course, Patsy was a great favorite with her, as she was a beautiful child with curly fair hair which could be coaxed into long corkscrew curls. Family legend suggests that, on the contrary, she didn't like me much. She told Vera that my dead-straight hair was like rats-tails, which makes me wonder whether I suffered other sorts of discrimination during those years. If so I have suppressed them, and indeed I have forgotten almost everything about this period of my life. I only know about the rattail remark because Vera was so outraged by it that she often told me about it.

We went for holidays in the summer, usually to the seaside. In 1937, I think, we went to Cornwall for joint holidays with the Wings, we shared a bungalow and they invited me to stay on at Rock near Padstow & keep Antony company. It was then that he and I, playing houses on the sand, dropped a big slab of slate which the two of us could only just move, sharp edge down across the instep of my left foot. Of course it was a bank holiday, & the Wings had to drive all over Cornwall to find a doctor, where eventually I was sewn up under ether. Ten years later the scar opened up again & sand came out. I spent months after the accident going up & down the stairs at Avenham on my bottom, as I was scared of hurting my foot by putting it to the ground. Apparently there was some fear of whether I would regain use of that foot. At least the funny feeling which persisted- and still persists- gave me a way of remembering which was left & which right. Mrs Wing often told me how Antony came running from the beach, saying I had hurt myself, and of her shock when she saw this ghastly wound with arterial blood pumping out.

At the carnival at Padstow

Another holiday was spent on a farm at Shepton Mallet in Somerset. Here we went quite rustic and attended all the activities of the farm, including the pig-killing. Vera was later quite outraged by this. Where was she? Were we there with the Wings again, as indeed photos would suggest? I remember that the parents came to get us & we went home in the car, riding together in the dicky, and carrying our new tom kitten with us. He was a ginger cat with white front and paws, and we called him Robin. He moved with us into the city in 1940. Yet other holidays were taken at Ringwood in the New Forest on the Hampshire Avon, where friends lent Daddy a cottage for the fishing. In 1935 we went to Bigbury on Sea and stayed at Burgh Island, where the tide came up and cut the island off from the mainland every day. I remember this expanse of sand which seemed endless to me then, and the water, shallow and near invisible, approaching from both sides across the bay and meeting in the middle in a line of little curls and ripples.

Family life at this period was extended by compulsory visits to our Other Granny for tea on Sundays. Her husband, who I do not remember, had died earlier on, by his own hand, I learned after I had grown up: there was a scandal connected to the failure of his business, for which Ronnie was perhaps partly responsible. I do not remember Grandpa Faulkner at all. We did not enjoy visiting Other Granny, especially her slobbery kisses on the mouth and her whiskery chin. We were not allowed to meet with Daddy, and never really did discover what he had done to deserve this, though Vera was clearly scared of him as well as totally determined not to let him anywhere near us. We did visit Uncle Nick's spinster sisters in Summertown, for tea and card games, especially Pit, a game I have never met anywhere else. These Aunties were Trixie and Peggy and Grace, three of Uncle Nick's 6 older sisters. They were unfailingly nice to us, though I'm afraid we were a bit reluctant to be parceled out to these elderly tea parties. Better were the visits to Hertford to Aunty Alice and Uncle Nick. We stayed at 4, Cowgate, a busy road where cars passed incessantly in the night, their headlights sweeping in arcs over the ceiling of the bedroom. Robert, who was Pat's age, was a chess and stamps whizz. Chris, like me born in the summer of 1931, played the piano expertly, though without enjoyment. This paralleled my own experience, though I wasn't even talented, & had to start all over again at the beginning every year. It didn't help matters that I used to escape by the window when I was expected to be practicing.

During the Iffley years we still went to school in North Oxford at Greycotes. Every day we walked to the bus-stop at Iffley Turn and took the bus to Carfax, where we changed to the Banbury Road bus. It was quite a long journey altogether. We wore our school uniforms of grey pleated skirts, grey knitted sweaters in fine wool with striped ties on top (navy, grey and magenta), felt hats with a cockade in the school colours at one side, grey knee-socks, and in summer, dark blue and grey dresses in fine shepherds' weave checks. We had to behave in a dignified way so as not to bring disrepute on the school, and to keep our hats on all the way home.

## II. SHIP STREET

Our move into Oxford took place after Granny's death. Vera was working in the probation office and was in charge of the delinquent boys, and she was able to rent 10 Ship Street from the city. It was a narrow mediaeval house made of wattle and daub, one room wide. It was said to have been one of the gatekeepers' cottages, along with no 12, that had served a subsidiary gate in the city walls where the sheep went in and out to graze, & Ship St had once been called Sheep St. The house's living room opened directly onto the street, where our dog Gypsy used to sit quietly on the pavement. Behind it there was a tiny kitchen, and a miniscule paved yard and outdoor lavatory. Vera took steps to make it livable. Her love of gardens was satisfied by window boxes at the front windows. The kitchen's semicircular sink was of stone and she had it moved into the backyard as a planter, making way for a modern sink and draining board

in the kitchen. A covered portion of the yard outside the back door was fenced off with folding doors, and a bath was installed. Gas geysers provided hot water in both the kitchen and the bathroom. We washed our clothes by hand and hung them in the yard to dry. The sheets and towels were sent to the laundry, and returned crisply ironed. From the yard one could look over the wall from a considerable height into a meandering passage which opened out from the Broad opposite Balliol College. The difference in level was due to the fact that Ship St was inside the original city wall, where detritus had accumulated for centuries. This wall was clearly visible in our cellar, which had an earth floor and was a dirty but romantic place to us. It was especially dirty because it was used as the coal cellar: we heated the house with two iron grates in the two living rooms. The coal came in sacks through the downstairs room with its uneven polished floor-boards and beautiful Bokhara rugs and was thrown down the curving cellar stairway. It was romantic, because the site was full of history. It was at 6 Ship St that the kitchen was in the actual bastion of the city walls where Archbishop Cranmer had been imprisoned, and forced to watch two other founding bishops of the Church of England, Latimer & Ridley, suffer at the stake for their faith. Here he had heard Latimer's immortal words to Ridley, which every English schoolchild, we included, knew by heart--"We shall this day light such a candle, Master Ridley, as shall never, by God's grace, be put out". The site was not far away in the centre of the Broad, marked by a shiny brass cross in among the cobblestones where the taxis waited. Pat and I loved being almost on the very site of history. We dug with trowels and tablespoons in the hard packed floor hoping to find something--anything--tangible to link us to this house's past. We were totally unlucky, and earned Vera's displeasure when she thought our digging was releasing foul vapours into the house. (Question... did she ritually spit?) But it was on the coal cellar steps that we sat in our dressing gowns when the air raid sirens sounded, until we were given permission to use the shelter at Jesus College across the street, and later even became so casual about it that we didn't leave our beds. Oxford was never bombed, though we once heard some interesting thuds far away of bombs exploding harmlessly in the countryside. But we did have rubber gas-masks which we had to carry to school along with our satchels.

The living/dining room was mainly Vera's domain. Two huge upholstered rocking chairs framed the fireplace, and a carved gate-leg table with twisted legs stood in the corner with its wheel-back chairs. A big knee-hole desk stood on the back wall. We always speculated that there were hidden compartments walled up on either side of the fireplace, and measured off the space that would be available to match its depth, but alas! we never discovered the answer to this question. It was Pat's & my job on Saturday mornings to help with housework, including polishing the floors and all the furniture and silver and brass, and it is this intimate acquaintance with every object in the house that makes me remember it so well.

Upstairs, the house had two rooms on the first floor and one on the second. Above Vera's living room was ours, with its wind up gramophone and 20's and 30's records which we loved and played incessantly. We had two small squishy upholstered chairs, and a beautiful little low armchair with a thick leather back held on by shiny brass studs, and a drop-in cushion covered with linen in a wavy dark-blue and green pattern. There was a Queen Anne chest of drawers, and curtains of striking red and white handblocked African material. There was also a big book-case, and a big gramophone with a wind-up handle, where we played the parents' 30's records, folk-

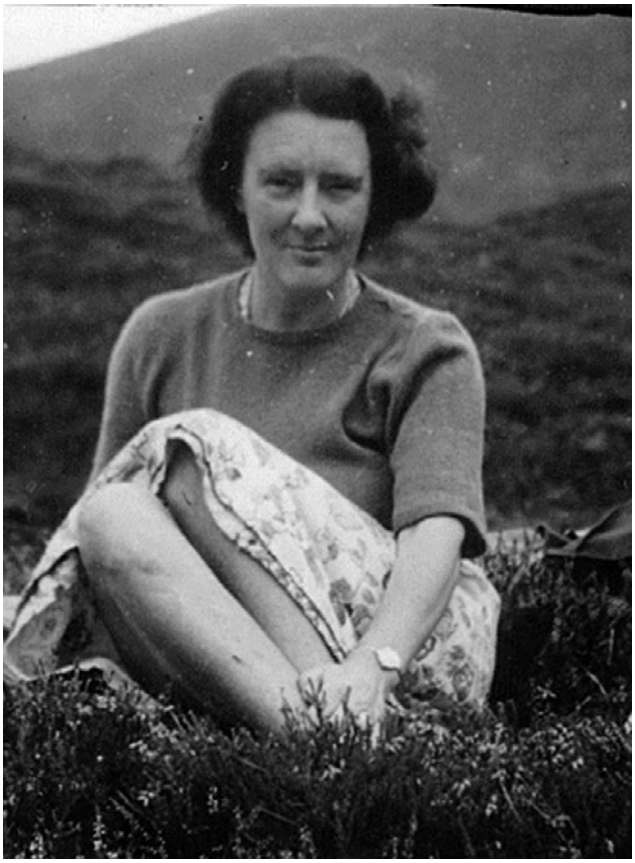
songs, Paul Robeson, the Teddy-Bears Picnic, and so on: I don't remember any special childrens' records then.

Above the kitchen was a tiny room where Vera slept, her walls were white and she had curtains of faded Kashmir embroidery at her closet doors and windows, and a huge yellow pine chest of drawers for her things. Above again was Pat's & my room, stretching across the house from back to front. The spiral stairs of this house did not allow the furniture to come in the normal way, & I well remember it being winched up the front of the house & in the windows. Pat slept under the front window, and my bed faced the stairs. There was a third bed, for friends, on the other window wall. Beside the stairs was a hanging cupboard, with a wing of shelves on either side for our belongings. Striped Madras bedspreads and a big blue rug completed the decor. It was a nice room, and we could hang out of the window and spit cherry stones on the passers-by, sometimes in contest with the Jesus College undergraduates across the street.

This was a delightful period of my life. The location of Ship St in the very centre of town gave us all sorts of possibilities for activities. We loved the bookstores, Blackwell's on the Broad, and Parker's around the corner on the Turl, and spent hours there pre-reading possible choices, before spending our book-tokens & pocket money. We roamed the college gardens, especially visiting our tortoises, George and Mary, who had the freedom of the great herbaceous border at Trinity, where they made mincemeat of all the yellow flowers, and may still be doing so. The gardener told us the other tortoise there, much larger, was over a hundred years old. We took our dog Gypsy, a Welsh Springer, yellow & white, for daily walks in the University parks & over the humpbacked bridge to Mesopotamia. We fed the ducks in the great round pond there, and in spring savoured the delicious smell of the big balsam poplar by the water. We walked in Christ Church meadows, and along the tow-path by the river Isis at Folly Bridge, past the brightly painted college barges, where we were sometimes invited for strawberries and cream in Eights week. Of all these destinations, my favourites were the museums. I especially loved the Pitt-Rivers, with its shrunken heads, mummies and other delights, and spent all my spare time there, or in the Natural History museum, studying the glass jars full of interesting preserved rare specimens, gazing at the dinosaur skeletons which reared overhead in a menacing way, or visiting my favourite stuffed camel on the upper balcony, and pulling out the endless drawers of the entomology collection, and scrutinising the contents. I also remember the treat of going to Christmas lectures at the South Kensington Museum in London: my interest in all aspects of natural history was overwhelming. As for Christmas, I played the part of the Virgin Mary at a pageant in the University church one year, I was 12 years old. We sometimes went to church there,

though my mother also favoured the more evangelical St. Aldate's, and would also sometimes send us to Sunday School at St. Michael at the North Gate, at the end of the street, which we liked because we could earn picture stamps of the Bible stories to stick into albums.

Sometimes I accompanied my mother on her early morning walks, mushrooming on the now disused cricket pitches in the parks, and returning to breakfast in the front room. Vera could make an appetising breakfast for two out of a single mushroom, served in thick and tasty sauce on toast. She was an outstanding cook and taught me the secrets of making really good English food, even out of war-time rations. After breakfast, I would set out for Greycotes on my bicycle, by the safer back roads. One time, disobeying as usual and taking the shorter but busier main road, I came off my bike in a bloody crash, & was succoured by Miss Spooner, daughter of the famous Dr. Spooner, after whom Spoonerisms were called, as he loved and was prone to this form of humour. She bound up my knee with a big linen handkerchief with her name on it. Vera reverently washed this bloody handkerchief, so I could take it and a thank-you note back to Miss Spooner. Another time, I tried to stop a man who had cornered a rat in the gutter and was stamping on it. I was terribly upset. Pat recounts a similar experience in Friar's entry, nearer home, where a man was attacking a rat which was trapped in a culvert, with a stick. She was upset & will always remember it too. Vera had a dreadful fear of spiders, and had to have them removed by someone else: me. She also couldn't cope with the fear of intruders under the bed, if we had been out in the evening. It was my job to look under all the beds for her when we came in: never mind hat they all had box-springs, and were very close to the floor, with no room to hide under. Perhaps that was why I wasn't scared to look under them, even then I suffered from a logical mind. A third thing Vera needed help with was meat: cutting it up, and even more, with plucking and drawing ducks and fowl, if any came our way. These tasks fell to me, & I found them interesting, if not exactly enjoyable, because I was interested in zoology. I also did a lot of our grocery shopping, queuing at Sainsbury's with the ration books, for the pitifully small portions of key foods that we were entitled to, such as one egg, two ounces of butter a week, and so on. Since I got in first in the afternoon Vera would leave me instructions for shopping or cooking that I could do before she got home. I would even sometimes cook supper, trying out recipes, and, worse, my own ideas. Vera was good to cook for, she always pretended to like my cooking even when it was horrible, as even I could see, which was not surprising on account of the ingredients. Our cooking was enlivened by gifts from overseas, arranged by proxy by Thomas, and sometimes with surprising contents. Once we were sent 3 lbs of camel fat in a can. It was sweetish, so Vera made it into cakes, along with the egg powder. Another



time the parcels organisation in South Africa sent us a 3 lb tin of tomato jam, which I didn't like at all, though it pleased everyone else in the family! I was disgusted that anyone should even think of making a jam out of my hated and feared bête noire vegetable. I absolutely never ate tomatoes. My prejudice was reinforced when at the age of 12 I was invited to lunch with my school-friend Julia Wright's grandmother. She was a formal and starchy old lady, and I had never been invited to an adult lunch party without Vera before. Lunch was served at a highly polished table, which sparkled with cut crystal and absolutely mystifying serried ranks of silver cutlery beside each plate. A maid handed round whole tomatoes. I surreptitiously looked around. Everyone took one, so it seemed to be obligatory. I took one too. I had no idea how to eat it, so I looked around some more. The correct technique seemed to be to pick up the tomato and eat it with one's teeth. I did. Alas for the novice tomato eater, it was over-ripe. I pierced it with my sharp, pre-teen teeth and it exploded, expelling its contents, juice, seeds and all, over at least a square yard of polished mahogany. I was mortified and have never- or more accurately only once on a memorable occasion in the Palazzo Doria in Rome in 1981- eaten a raw tomato since.

Greycotes was a nice school, founded by the headmistress, Mrs Cunliffe, who herself liked children, had three of her own, and treated us well. The school was in a tall, spacious private house, with a classroom block in the garden, and stood in extensive grounds on the Banbury Road. Prep-school for girls, pre-prep for boys, the curriculum was geared for the little boys' needs. Thus we started Latin at age 7. I was immediately put into the second form when I arrived there at the age of 5, because I could already read. We studied all the usual 3 R's, as well as scripture with Miss Burnley, who had us that first year make a model of a Palestinian village out of cardboard, paint it with enamel paint, and throw sand at it while the paint was still wet. Years later I saw the exact original from the air when I flew into Jeddah in 1950. We did Art with Mrs Cunliffe, and also Music, where we played simple percussion instruments, and I excelled at the triangle. We also studied Elocution & learned lots of poems by heart to impress our parents on speech day: things like The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck. Pat even won a prize for elocution. We were tremendous chauvinists, and sang patriotic songs with fervour. For us the sun never set on the British Empire, and the countries on the globe shone the brightest red. Even our study of ancient Rome was tinged with this: the British Empire was the true inheritor of that of the Romans. We did Greek dancing dressed in lettuce green Greek tunics, and began ballet, contorting our feet into the five positions. We also learned the intricacies of dancing round the may-pole, and for this purpose one was installed in the garden. There we also did plays, Shakespeare in English, and one time Julius Caesar in Latin! Our efforts were rewarded with red stars and gold stars, so called credits which were accumulated on behalf of our four "houses". Neither Pat nor I had any problem with school or with learning. We loved it. And both of us sat for public school scholarships & were successful the first time round in getting them for Westonbirt, though mine was a somewhat inferior one for art compared with hers, the top academic scholarship. We have always wondered what made Vera choose this school above others. Obviously our winning scholarships had a lot to do with it, and her desire to have us in a safe place in wartime, & to use the Army allowance on us, rather than herself. But I think she was most impressed by the beauty of Corsham Court and Bowood, where Westonbirt spent the war years in evacuation, while their own buildings were requisitioned for military use. These houses, with their parks and gardens, were ideal settings for our formative years, Vera thought, and I think she was right, for these memories have never left us, even if we grew to dislike Westonbirt itself and all that it stood for in repression, religiosity

and control. These aspects of the school were much less evident during the years of evacuation, but flowered when the school returned to its rightful home in the autumn of 1944.

At Greycotes we played in the extensive shrubberies and in the hay paddock, where we made houses in the cut hay, or stood around under the great horse-chestnut trees, playing conkers and thinking of England, for in these wartime years we were desperately patriotic. We listened to Churchill's rousing speeches on the wireless, & tried to live up to them. At other times, in a more childish mood, we would play in the vegetable garden, which was also within bounds to us. At home we devoured books, especially loving the William books. How we despised Violet Elizabeth Bott! I can honestly say I was a bookworm, and read an average of three books a week. I read under the bedclothes every night for hours and spent all my money on batteries for my flashlight. I consumed great piles of books from the public library, and also all the books of the house: Kipling, Hardy, Dickens though I drew the line at Mary Webb, one of my mother's favourites. Reading was a real passion, an addiction. Of course, there was no television, and the "wireless" was not particularly geared to childrens' interests, in fact I don't recall listening to it at all, except for the news. At weekends, once we had done the housework, Vera liked to go out in the country. We didn't have a car, and indeed hardly needed one, for there was petrol rationing, and anyway the buses left from the centre of town at Gloucester Green. Favourite destinations were Cumnor Hurst and Boars Hill. The purpose of the outings was to walk for miles. We returned the way we had come, now thoroughly exhausted. In the summer, we would go to the seaside. In 1940 it was Swanage, on the south coast, where we stayed at a B & B. Every day there were German "hit and run" air-raids. A single plane would come over, drop its bombs as fast as it could on a coastal target, and machine-gun the beach. Consequently, although it was midsummer, the Swanage beaches were deserted & could not be used. The way round this, for us walkers, was to get up early & walk west down the coast to a little cove called Winspit. The walk was along the cliffs, and we passed, and sometimes bathed in, the natural rock swimming pool on Dancing Ledge. At Winspit we would duck for cover when we heard the plane go over, then emerge to swim, make sandcastles or go on further expeditions. It was the closest we ever got to the war, for on our return we would often find that Swanage had been the target that day, and that another group of houses lay in ruins. With hindsight, it seems a strange place for a family holiday in 1940, & perhaps only explained by the fact that Thomas was stationed nearby, though I do not remember that we ever saw him there. Presumably Vera did. Thomas told me in 1994 that he was actually in command of Corfe Castle, Winspit and Worth Matravers, and billeted in Forres School.


Another wartime holiday was spent at the Constables at Rothesay on the Isle of Bute. Hilda Constable was an Oxford friend of Vera's, recently married to a widower. I have no idea where she & Norman met, or how. It was August, 1941, and I was just 10 years old. We travelled to Scotland by train, a crowded troop train, so we had to sit on our suitcases in the corridor all night. It was a great adventure, we had never spent the night on a train before, or been to Scotland. When we arrived at Glasgow station, there were no buffets open as it was a Sunday morning at about 6 AM. Fortunately, Vera had a jar of Rose's Lime Marmalade and a packet of ryvitas and a penknife, and we sat on a luggage cart and had breakfast before we caught the local train and the Clyde steamer. Norman Constable was factor and kinsman to Lord Bute, and had an allocation of petrol to drive around on estate business. He often took me with him, so I was able to explore the whole island. He wore the kilt, which we all liked very much. With him I went to remote sheep-farms in the hills, and to the beaches on the other side of the island, where it was possible to find small pink cowrie shells. I collected a handful of them, which I still have, all these years later. I have never seen them anywhere else, and this one beach is the only place I have ever found them. I think these outings with Uncle Norman, as we called him, were only possible because Pat spent her time in the company of Norman's nieces, Anne and Marian, who were a bit older than her. This made me the odd man out as the youngest by several years. Among the highlights of this trip was a tea party in a submarine in Rothesay Harbour. We went for a guided tour and the captain submerged so that we could look through the periscope at the harbour above. Vera had dressed us in our Liberty smocks, not very practical for scaling ladders in this cramped interior. We also made friends in wartime Rothesay with two young Polish army officers, who the Constables had befriended. We thought them very dashing, and they liked us too. Perhaps we reminded them of their family back in Poland, for they were brothers, Count Cernatowski & his brother, Count Adam Cernatowski. We were very impressed that they were counts as we had never met any before. (The correct spelling of their family name may have been Kurnatowski.)

All too soon the trip was over. We visited the Constables again next year in Rossshire, at Tigh-na-Mara, their house near Evanton. Uncle Norman had been pried away from his job by Auntie Hilda and was working for a new landowner. I think he was sad about this, and Vera disapproved of the change very much.

Vera had lots of other friends in Oxford. There were Ship Street friends, like Stevie at no 6, who was the housekeeper there, and would always give me a cup of tea after school, and Mary Stanley-Smith at no.12, who was the County Librarian, and 50 years later was still living there. She had drop-in tea-parties on Sundays in her tiny front room, where we met a lot of interesting people. One went on to become a bishop, another became the racing correspondent of the Daily Mirror who dreamt the winners and shared his premonitions with the readers. Eventually he inherited an Irish peerage. Another familiar of the house was a Polish count who chased me round the house with an old-fashioned spiked can-opener--but this was later, when I was staying overnight at Mary's. Victor Bellfield lived at no. 3, he worked for Oxford University Press, and was always an interesting person to visit, with amazing books and conversation. He was in his thirties, I suppose, and at this time my favourite person. I loved to drop in to see him after school and was always sure of a welcome. I went there to try out the string figures in his big old Victorian book of string games from the Pacific islands. Graham Greene lived for a while at no 6, and Yehudi Menuhin at 13...I wonder why I am so sure of this? Perhaps it was only that ENSA operated there & posters were put up with his strange name. But Vera's real friends were further afield: Mary Potter, a painter, who always dressed in red and black, which suited her red & black personality. She had been a pupil of Tonks at the Slade. She visited us frequently, for tea or supper or both, as well as going along on our country walks. Another painter friend was Ursula Tyrrwhitt, who had been a friend at the Slade of Gwen and Augustus John. Vera herself, during her early married life, had studied art at the Ruskin School, and her friends reflected this period & her passion for painting.

Purple dress made by me, with our dog Gypsy

Sadly, Vera had little time or tranquility to pursue her own gift for painting. I often noticed that she could only paint when she was really happy, and this was an elusive condition for her at this time. She suffered badly from migraine headaches, which would strike her down without warning and lay her low for anything from 24 to 36 hours. She would take to her bed, and often vomited as well as enduring the terrible headaches. At these times I, too, was depressed, feeling that the life of the house was standing still. I would run up and down stairs, trying to tempt her with mugs of tea or little meals on trays, tidying up the sick-room and undertaking nursing duties. Life only really started again when she felt better. It was at these times, especially, that I learned the role of little miss fix-it, trying by being extra nice and quiet and helpful to make the bad and unpredictable go away. This skill was also needed when Vera lost her equanimity and started a row, usually with Pat, and often for no discernible reason. Pat never learned the warning signs, and was less willing than I to compromise her principles or interests for the sake of peace and quiet. However, 50 years later she still could not bear to hear raised voices or participate in a "row". Vera would worry

about our friends, especially Pat's, and whether they were leading us astray. Pat bore the brunt of this, being the older. Gradually I evolved into being the perfect younger child who could do no wrong, while Pat bore the brunt of Mummy's anxieties, which were many. Chief among these was the role in which she suddenly found herself after her mother's death of being the sole support of her family, with no one to fall back on, and no-one to turn to in time of need. She had her job at the probation office, and she moonlighted by colouring photographs and doing black and white retouching for the local photographer's, Ramsey and Muspratt on the Cornmarket. She did wonderful work, stippling the flesh-tones delicately on the matt surfaces of the photos. Helen Muspratt was a renowned photographer, one of the second wave of great women photographic portraitists, and Vera's work enhanced these studies. She and Helen became firm friends. But even with this extra source of income, money was tight around our house, and the worry about it was never far from her mind. In some ways, the war helped here, for it was patriotic to wear old clothes and make do and mend. For all those years she made do with one undestructable outer garment, a reversible period piece called an Inverness cape, flying from her shoulders by crossed straps or securely buttoned up the front. She had found this treasure somewhere second-hand. We, too, got most of our school uniforms, not from the expensive school supplier's on New Bond Street, which had a stuffed horse in the window, but from the second-hand cupboard at school. But the contrast between the penury she endured for us, and the expensive education she used our father's army allowance to buy for us must surely have been difficult for her to bear. Of course in actual fact I was far from the perfect child she imagined. As with all children, events occurred at school which got me into deep trouble. One such event took place at Greycotes, and arose through a complete misunderstanding. Our Geography class was studying India, with special emphasis, evidently, on Delhi. My close friend Susan Witts and I burst out laughing at our inner picture when we heard about statesmen "going to Delhi" and so on. Naturally, I was asked to share the joke with the class. As a prudish child, I was unable to reveal that at Pat's school, Westonbirt, the lavatory was euphemistically referred to as "Delhi", so I prudently told my teacher the joke was "not fit for her ears". I have no idea what images this conjured up for my teacher, but they were evidently more graphic than my 10 year old imagination could envisage! The school came down really heavily on me, consulted my mother, and prepared to ask her to withdraw me. They found it difficult to accept the truth, which was that I had absolutely no idea even of the existence of these forbidden realms of knowledge, and was only displaying my typical prep-school humour.

Pat in her school uniform

The Ship St era lasted from 1940 to 1944, though we continued to live there until 1949. Leaving for boarding school in the summer of 1944 really put an end to an idyllic and very settled period of my life, a life longed for through the long terms at Westonbirt, and avidly embraced on

my return. The departure for the new school was heralded by intense activity with the school clothes list, which detailed every item needed and the quantities thereof. Most clothes had to be regulation uniform. The school cloak and felt hat were in maroon, and obtained from the second-hand cupboard. The cloak reached the ankles on a junior girl, and was retained throughout the years at school, becoming shorter and shorter in relation to one's height. Cloaks were of warm wool, and lined with shot silk in the house colours. We liked these garments which were much more useful and adaptable than coats. They were worn over grey tweed skirts, white blouses and dark red school ties. Grey vee-necked wool sweaters with maroon stripes round the neck, brown brogues & lots of pairs of lisle stockings were also required. Under our clothes we wore 2 layers of panties, the outer ones were long grey gym knickers with elastic at the waist and thigh. The list asked for woolen vests and liberty bodices. For the latter, the older girls substituted the vestigial bras of the day, which were known as "BBs", short for bust-bodices, though, curiously, these essential garments were not on the list. For games, we had so-called shorts, really ladylike divided skirts, aertex shirts and thick white wool sweaters. On Sundays, pink silk dresses and long maroon cardigans, to be fastened by the bottom button only, a tradition with no known function. The cut of the Sunday dresses was archaic, even for those days, with 2 box pleats, one over each knee, and the bright shocking pink together with the dark red cardigans was unfortunate for red-heads. An identical model of dress was issued in cotton for the summer, in pink, blue or green with linear white checks. However, in spite of everything, we did look smart in an archaic sort of way, and we became proud of these archaisms and traditions.

When all this stuff, and much more, was gathered together, we had to sew Cashs' name tapes onto everything. These tapes had to include the house initial and one's personal number. Mine was D, for Dorchester House, 8, for me, and my sister, unapproachably senior, was D30. The name-tapes' length, with my first name written out in full, was an unforeseen burden when it came to hemming a hundred or more of these little bits of cloth onto everything, but at last the whole kit was ready to be packed in a trunk and dispatched in advance to school, to be retrieved in one's dormitory on arrival. The summer of 1944 at Corsham Court and Bowood was an unexpected gift to me. Vera had great apprehension that Westonbirt would mismanage my school career as they had Pat's, yet she was committed to sending me there by the scholarship that I had won. Pat had arrived there in September 1941 with considerable expectations as the top scholar, and completed her year in the 4th form with distinction, coming first in most subjects. The school, for some impenetrable reason, therefore decided she should be advanced to the Upper Fifth, skipping the first year of preparation for the School Certificate. Vera went along with this, trusting that the school knew what was best. Pat had a miserable year, torn away from her friends, and forced to associate with older girls. For the first time, the school work was beyond her, which was not surprising, as she had missed a full year's work in every subject. At the end of this year, she failed Math in the School Certificate, which meant an automatic fail in the whole exam. She entered the Sixth form with the intention of sitting it again, simultaneously with studying for Oxford Entrance in English Language and literature, the school's choice. After a year, she switched to Classics, the school's choice again: they followed up some stray remark she made, and let her start Greek in the Upper Sixth, too late for success in the very stiff competition for Oxford and Cambridge entrance in 1947, year of return of so many service women. Faced with this overwhelming evidence of the school's mismanagement, our mother decided to forestall a similar fate for me by sending me to the school one term early, where I would enter the year above my age group to see if I could keep up with the work. I would then advance with this peer group, as

one of its youngest members. I was able to do this, maintain a position at the head of the class, and make my school friends among these girls. Vera's strategy had succeeded.

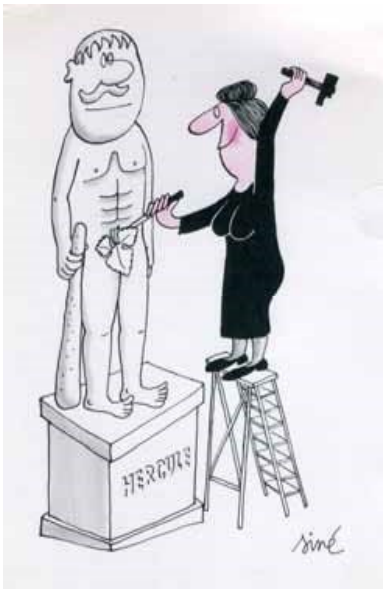
One unforeseen result of my early entry to the school was the chance it gave me to be at Corsham and Bowood for the last term of the school's evacuation. The need for the airfield

Corsham Court

at Westonbirt House in Gloucestershire had dwindled at this point, and the school prepared to return there in the autumn of 1944. I would not have missed the time of evacuation for anything. My form, 4C, slept at Corsham, but went to Bowood every day by bus - a half-hour trip- for lessons and sports. Corsham Court was an Elizabethan manor house in the middle of a Wiltshire village. The front garden was filled with immense Yew hedges. At the back, considerable gardens were separated by a ha-ha from the park beyond, allowing the eye to sweep across an unbroken vista of fields and hedges, specimen trees and pretty, toylike herds of cows. On the far left was a big walled vegetable garden which was out of bounds to us. But in front of this a huge, centuriesold plane tree sprawled, re-rooted at its perimeter where it gave rise to sizeable daughter trees. This complex of trees was a favourite place of the girls, as was the Roman bathhouse folly beyond it. Beyond was the North Walk, where we had to run before breakfast every morning. Fortunately, that summer I was grounded for several weeks by another of those germy "throats" that were isolated to prevent the spread of dangerous diseases in those pre-antibiotic days. This one

was for scarlet fever, and as a result I did not have to go to Bowood for classes for several weeks, but could bum around at Corsham all day. I made illicit tours of the outbuildings, and found one full of Victorian carriages. I was also given a tour of the library and picture gallery, normally off-bounds to students, being in the private, Methuen part of the house. It was here in the gallery that a sculpture of a sleeping angel was identified as a lost work by the youthful Michelangelo 30 or 40 years later. The paintings in the rest of the house, which was occupied by the Third and Sixth forms, and my part of the Fourth form, were also remarkable. My dormitory was in one of the major bedrooms over the front door and as such was the site of many canvases, among them several of the martyrdom of St.Sebastian. We had small respect for these works of art, and in fact liked to use them as targets for our slippers. Family portraits abounded in the Music Room and the halls and corridors and landings: among them some were by Reynolds, the Grey Woman who haunted the house, and the Red Boy. The older girls, including Pat, were especially interested in the hauntings, because one of the sixth form dormitories was the favoured site of the Grey Lady's appearances. My friends and I never saw her, unfortunately.

An exciting world event which happened during this grounded period was the launching of the second front in Normandy on June 6th, 1944, I heard this news over the common-room radio. It was one of those events for which everyone retains an indelible memory of time and place.I should not leave the summer of '44 without a word about Bowood. One of the great 18th century country houses, it had been the scene of political strategy planning of the Whigs, when the first Lord Lansdowne built the great Palladian front and Italian gardens onto an earlier house. This front consisted of a pillared portico with, on the left, a considerable orangery. This orangery was converted into classrooms for the junior girls. Bereft of its orange-trees, it still housed the collection of classical sculpture collected by generations of Lansdownes on the grand tour. My corner of the classroom, the back left, also housed the best copy of the Discobolous in existence, and I sat more or less underneath the outstretched body. The classroom also housed at least one other male statue, that of a young Greek god. Other classical marbles stood throughout the house. All these young men of marble were decently clad in lead figleaves to protect our sensibilities.




Actually, the figleaves were not provided specially for us, being tributes to the Victorian attitudes of the Fitzmaurice family in former times. Imagine the horror one summer morning when the Headmistress, Miss Violet Grubb (a.k.a. the Purple Pest) found all the statues throughout the school had had their fig leaves removed. Panic at the school! Never mind that our maidenly innocence could not be offended by the sight of full frontal nudity, (a rare and obviously forbidden sight in our world), as all the offending parts of the statues had been tailored to hold their leaden garments. (This conjures up intriguing pictures of drawers of parts stored for reattachment when and if the time was ripe, neatly labelled as to provenance) The fig-leaf caper was obviously an expelling offence (I nearly wrote a hanging offence) and Miss Grubb reacted strongly, calling a special assembly, alternately uttering threats and cajoling us to rat on our friends. The culprit, wisely, never owned up, and her friends maintained an honorable silence. The mystery was never solved, though it continued to give us girls a

good laugh. The term at school could never go quickly enough for us. We literally counted the days until the last assembly, the singing of Jerusalem, the packing of our trunks and the holidays. In the summer we got two months. Life that first summer seems completely idyllic from the vantage point of fifty years later. We spent a lot of time on the river, punting, or in the river, swimming in the muddy, murky Cherwell. That summer a solid layer of duckweed covered the whole river with a bright green carpet of small, floating plants which stuck to one's body, especially around the neck and hairline. We had to make a little hole in this heaving, bobbing carpet in order to get into the river, but that did not deter us, except for our cousin Chris, a less-confident swimmer, who found it most off-putting. That first summer I especially wanted to keep in touch with my Greycotes friends: Mary Hiscock, Mary MacMichael, Susan Witts, but the experience of boarding school was to drive a wedge between us, and the Otherness of the world there was incomprehensible to those who took no part in it. Much of our time was still spent within the family. We visited Aunty Alice in Hertford, learning to negotiate the London Underground and to find our way from Paddington to the Suburban station at Kings Cross, from whence the filthily dirty trains with their ancient compartments which stretched without corridors from side to side of the coach, left for Hertford. Aunty Alice and Uncle Nick lived in a tall house with a large garden in Bengeo. Aunty Alice was very active in her church, Holy Trinity, where Uncle Nick was churchwarden. Alice did the flowers, largely out of her own garden, and also busied herself with the Mothers' Union & the Townswomens' Guild. She embroidered and knitted for all sorts of good causes, and sewed a tremendous number of aprons for jumble sales, patched from different & beautiful Liberty fabrics. She had a sewing room full of aprons and teacosies & other nice things in the attic of the house, along with a marvellous treadle sewing machine. Pat & I slept in the other attic room with Chris: often it was rather chilly & AA would not let us sleep in our woolly vests, as we wanted. We had to put them out to air with our other clothes. When she came up to kiss us goodnight she would sneak in a little feel of the vests we had put on the back of the chair to see if they were still warm. If not, we were in trouble. It gives some idea of how incredibly cold houses were in those days. We all three dreaded being asked to fetch something from the larder, seemingly miles through arctic cold from the warmth of the fireside, though even there one's front would warm up, and one's back remain chilly.

One time, on the way home across London, Pat and I adopted a black and tan mongrel stray dog that was wandering crazily around in a bombed-out district. We bought it a ticket and carried it proudly home to Vera. She spent an anxious night trying to diagnose its crazy barking, frothing, slavering jaws, and eerie howling and decided the next day to call the vet. Between them, they came to the conclusion that it might have rabies, was deranged, and above all would very likely

bite. Regretfully, they had it put to sleep. So our Samaritan act was to no avail, and a bad outcome for this poor war victim was the sad result of our philanthropy.

I have no recollection of the vet, nor of the doctor, who we must obviously have seen for the various minor ills of childhood. But I do clearly remember our dentist, Mr. Albert Hubert Herbert, who qualified in 1910 and had been our mother's dentist for her entire life. He lurked behind heavy dirty-looking dingy net curtains in his dreaded upper room across the High from the Catte St intersection. Vera had perfect teeth, but not so me. Mr Herbert hated to give injections, in fact I think he hated dentistry altogether, and had certainly failed completely to keep up with advances in its practice. His office was equipped with the standard round tray of white glass, the spigot of foul tasting pink liquid and the demand to rinse and spit. To me, it was not far from the times our grandmother talked of in a hushed voice, when one end of a string was tied around a painful tooth, and the other end was attached to a door-handle. Slamming the door then removed the tooth neatly, so we were told. Mr Herbert did not go along with the new-fangled idea of freezing gums for fillings, and I went through many horrible sessions clinging whiteknuckled to the arms of the old-fashioned upright dentist's chair. Worse, he neglected decay in one of my molars until it was too late to fill it, so decided to pull it out. On this occasion injections were clearly called for, but he did not wait for them to take effect. Instead, he started to pull the tooth out despite my screams of pain and terror. I got home without the tooth and with an enormous cavity in my gum, which gave rise to numerous fragments of tooth and splinters of bone over the next few days. So much for the evil tasting pink rinse! Sins of comission such as this were balanced by sins of omission. Vera was very worried that I had crooked teeth and kept asking him at the six monthly appointments when he was going to straighten them, though she must have dreaded the considerable expense this would involve. So she was glad when he kept saying "Not yet... not yet" but appalled when he suddenly announced when I was 15 that it was too late to do anything effective. I attribute the fact that even then she did not consult another dentist to her deep fear of finding even more unimaginable horrors in the unfamiliar surroundings of another dentist's office, a fear which I share. Better the monster we know... However, the resulting jumble of teeth is Mr. Herbert's memorial.

## III. WESTONBIRT.

We returned to the original home of the school in late 1944. I was just entering the Lower Vth. For the first time the school was able to reassemble itself physically into houses, four of them in the main school, and one in the stable block, where the VIth form also resided, elevated to cubicles instead of shared dormitories, and to solitary cracking of the ice on the bedroom jugs on cold mornings. Westonbirt House had been built in the 1880's by a rich magnate, Sir George Holford. It was one of the last really great houses to be built from scratch before the 1914 war put a stop to that sort of thing. It was an enormous house set in a magnificent garden and among greenhouses full of orchids. It had a famous arboretum across the main road, which was usually out of bounds to us. The gardens, though, were enough. They were walled and subdivided into terraces, Italian gardens & park like areas. They were adorned with walks, vistas and already magnificent trees- cedars of Lebanon, trees of heaven, Gingkos and others. It was a

garden with every sort of visual delight, especially the watery elements of fountains and mossy, stone-ringed pools, cascades and streamlets.

The house wasn't nearly as nice. A huge 3-storey block on a high terrace commanding the garden, it was built around an immense hall with minstrels' gallery and walls covered with gold-tooled leather, on which many large, high-Victorian pictures were hung, giving a cluttered, over-rich and totally extravagant appearance. It was here that we had school assemblies. The house was designed with double passages and staircases so that the "family" would never have to endure meeting servants in their space. Even the garden had had to be guarded from the servants' eyes, and the kitchens and staff quarters looked out onto a high blind wall a few feet away, horrible for them but providentially situated for the training of tall espaliered magnolia trees, which gave off great gusts of exotic scent in early summer. In the house, common rooms and some class-rooms were on the ground-floor, dormitories and house drawing rooms upstairs. Dorchester House dormitories were on the second floor, under the roof. Once a year we had the fire drill, which featured practice at using the Davy Apparatus. The rooms were equipped with pairs of webbing belts on either end of ropes which were paid out through a differential gear box. One put on the exposed belt, & lowered one-self out of the window, three floors up, and over the windowsill, which was equipped with a roller to reduce friction on the rope. The apparatus paid out the rope, & slowly one twirled one's way down, pushing the walls & windows on passing with both hands to cut down on spin. The other belt appeared and a second girl was on her way as soon as the first one's feet touched ground and the belt was off. Even the girls whose houses were on the first floor learned this routine by doing it. Their dormitories were in rooms which had once been the main bedrooms: one had a raised arcaded area at one end for the bath, and painted murals on the ceiling as well as the walls. A dingy patch was said to mark where someone had thrown a plate of porridge at the ceiling.

Dormitories were furnished with alternating beds and 2-storey oak wash-stands, each with a towel rail and a jug & basin. Hot water came in brass cans from the pantry. Bedside tables were, without exception, adorned with family photos in leather frames. Beds were made to exacting standards with hospital corners, and inspected by Miss Ripper. The rising bell rang at 7 AM, and we arose. From then until breakfast every action was governed by a bell. We washed, dressed and did our hair. A bell rang so we would say our prayers, 5 minutes later another rang, so we could stop. Miss Ripper checked our finger nails & hair... was it above the height of our collars? She questioned us about our bowels, and issued sanitary supplies as needed, or put us on the "off-games" list. Then a bell rang: time for exercises in the great courtyard in front of the school. Marshalled by Miss Gibb, we jumped and stretched, bent and deep-breathed for 15 minutes until

the welcome sound of the next bell allowed us to escape for breakfast. After this, we made our beds (stripped daily) and took part in our assigned domestic chores until it was time for the first class.

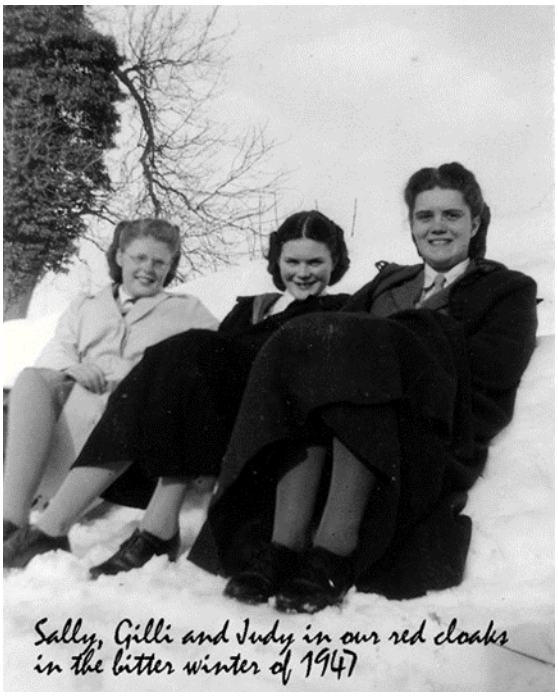
Trooping to class, the girls used the servants' corridors; the staff, the family ones which now also led to Miss Grubb's quarters, an area which one hoped never to be summoned to visit. Laboratories were in the stable-block, and the gym was a separate purpose-built building, presided over by Miss Gibb, (Faith Hope), who had joined the school in 1928, when it was founded, and was a sadist of the first-order, in the eyes of the girls, and in actuality as well.

Miss Gibb was in charge of a system called "Lying Down", which took place in the gym every week-day after lunch. The term "Lying Down" was a euphemism, as that was far from descriptive of what went on there. The change to harsh physical torture was the result of some parents' objections to their darling daughters lying on the draughty cold gym floor after lunch as a punishment for evil goings on instead of resting on their nice comfortable beds. The evil doings could relate to real errors of deportment or to manners. A list was posted, and members of the staff and school prefects (The “Parlour”) but not house prefects could put any girl caught in a misdemeanour down for lying down. Typical offences would be slouching, not sitting bolt-upright, running in the corridors, not standing pressed to the wall when someone shouted "stand" to let a staff-member or Parlour member regally sweep by, or breaches of table manners. No-one ever offended twice, if they could avoid it. I once, and only once, landed up there for spitting out cherry stones, and as a consequence took care never to put anyone down when I reached the Parlour myself.

So what was this ordeal, presided over by Miss Gibb? First, emphatically, no-one ever lay down. Instead, we sat in a row, cross-legged, bolt-upright, and facing the gym's ribs. We kept our arms up, hands behind our heads. We were not allowed to move, or change position at all. The ordeal lasted for 20-30 minutes. Miss Gibb walked up & down the row, looking critically at our posture, and putting her knee into our spines, she would force our arms and thus backs backwards until they cracked noisily. Of course we were to remain silent. It was only a year or two after I left that Miss Gibb wrecked two girls' backs, doing actual physical damage to them, and was asked to leave as a result. We accepted this sort of thing as normal, instead of raising hell about it, and so did our parents: it seems rather spineless in retrospect, and was part of the code which gave absolute power over the pupils to the school, as well as complete parental trust that the system was absolutely in the best interests of the girls. Clearly, the parents lacked any sort of association, where they could have got together and discussed this sort of problem, which would be clearly defined nowadays as child abuse. The school also took care to restrict our access to home, by reading all our letters out: we had to leave them unsealed for the purpose. This made it quite difficult to complain to our families, or to communicate privately with the outside world at all. Perhaps the school wanted to avoid incidents like the one at Corsham when Pat, a junior girl then, filled in a form on the back of the stamp-book, an advertisement "Deaf! You too shall hear!", & posted it in the village. Next she knew, the representative from London had arrived by train to fit the lady of Corsham Court with a hearing aid!

Exit permits were non-existent below the sixth form, and younger girls were never allowed out beyond the grounds by themselves, after all we might meet BOYS beyond the perimeter wire,

as one girl did: the penalty was expulsion. We were allowed out for day visits with our parents or other close relatives once or twice a term, a much looked forward to treat, involving meals at the Hare & Hounds at Tetbury, miles away at the school gates. Always, one's best friends were invited too. Mine were Julie Wilkes, in the junior grades, and later on, Sally Peachey and Judy Poulton. I have not kept in touch with any of them. Julie came from Leicester, where her father manufactured shoes: her mother was dead and her household was presided over by an aunt. I once went to stay there. We went riding, and I had to eat purple pickled cabbage. Sally, my greatest longterm friend, came from Northern Rhodesia, near Abercorn. Her father was a gladiolus farmer and her mother, like Julie's, was dead. Sally, an only child, had been sent to England for her schooling in 1938, and had got stuck there for the duration of the war. Fortunately, her father had bought a house in the New Forest, near Fordingbridge, and appointed guardians, Petal and Dear, who were surrogate parents to her. It was fully a decade before she went back to Africa and saw her father again. By then, he had remarried and started a new family, and I don't think she ever felt really at home in the new set-up where a great deal of babysitting was required of her. She soon left home to get married herself. Judy's parents were also far away: her father was British Resident in Indore, and she also was in England for a period of years to get her schooling. These girls' stories were by no means unusual: the school was packed with the children of colonial servants & emigrants, and also with the children of broken homes: one girl I knew had two complete sets of parents in addition to her own: her parents had each been married to someone else before they married each other and had her. They had then divorced each other in order to each get married for a third time: an unusual sequence in those days. Another girl lived in the US but in the holidays her parents rented her a suite in the Dorchester Hotel on Park Lane in London. We were very impressed by this, it surpassed all the other stories people had about their families.


Sally, Gilli and Judy in our red cloaks in the bitter winter of 1947

So one might say that schools of this type served a useful function in being havens for girls who lacked stability in their home lives, as well as giving them a good education in small classes, hardening them off in the physical sense with lots of lacrosse & Lying Down, and turning their eyes towards other possibilities in life than necessarily following in their parents' footsteps. And of course there were also Things Above, and several girls I knew became missionaries, much to their parents' surprise, one would presume.

To return to Miss Gibb, her realm extended into two other important areas, Games and Gym. Games had its sub-areas: Lacrosse, Tennis, Swimming and Diving. Each activity was centred around the school teams and the goal of every girl was supposed to be to reach a school team, preferably a first team. Lacrosse was our primary sport in the winter, and played on

Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, whatever the weather, that is, even if it snowed, On Tuesdays and Saturdays, technically free afternoons, we played "Voluntary Games", which introduced a new concept of the word voluntary into the English language. How we groaned when we saw a little notice on the games board headed "The following will play voluntary games this afternoon". We tore up and down the sports field, waving our lax sticks, catching and passing, and displaying the beautiful deportment that was the object of the exercise. We were to grow tall and upright, unlike the denizens of inferior schools, who scrabbled over the field hockey ball at ground level. After school, an invariable routine also demanded that we change to skin level, wash all over, change our underclothes, and display our steaming woolen vests on the backs of our chairs for Miss Ripper, the house matron, to check by feel for warmth and moisture. Here too our subterfuges were countered by adult suspicion.

Gym took place once a week in lesson hours. It was largely concerned with deportment, though we did our share of leaping at the horse and shinning up ropes or the parallel bars. But the most important things were our backs. Backs were graded from A+ to E- according to their suppleness and one's deportment. Every term we had to undress, put our hands over our heads, & then lower our torsos into the horizontal position, trying to suck in our stomachs & at the same time make a continuous hollow along our spines, punctuated by a row of bony prominences under the skin, like those the dinosaurs that the University Museum at Oxford displayed so well. The type of back was largely inborn, but could be improved by judicious and injudicious exercise. The point of all this was deportment. We were to come out of the system as upright as those Biblical characters who carried water from the well, the ever graceful Rachel and Rebecca. We were also to excel in the exercise of carrying books on our heads without dropping them. Only then would we be fitted for our destiny: the life of service if possible, but if not, the constant round of being in the limelight, tall and straight, serenely opening garden fetes or leading off in the waltz at balls, proud in the knowledge that even if our hair was a mess or our complexions blotchy as the result of strong soap and cold water, our “A” backs would conquer all, our queenly bearing proclaiming far and wide our preparedness for all that life could offer. "A" backs also, Miss Gibb confided to us to our great surprise, would stand us in great stead in the other great test of our lives... childbirth. We did not believe her, nor did we believe that childbirth had anything at all to do with our lives, then or in the future.

On the whole, the girls were as innocent a lot of young females as could be found anywhere, totally ignorant of the "facts of life", and deliberately kept that way by the authorities. How many of us, I wonder, went into puberty at school without having ever heard of menstruation? Some precocious souls, however, did have clandestine & inaccurate knowledge, usually because they had been to a boys' prep school or had older brothers. One friend was expelled because she not only knew some dirty jokes, but had the gall to write them in the middle pages of her math homework book, which she forget to tear out before she handed it in.

Finally, to give the school credit where due, a Harley Street specialist was called in to inform us about human reproductive biology. This, though, was fairly late on in our school careers, instead of when we needed it most, on arrival at the school. To do Westonbirt justice, there were teachers there who were outstanding in their fields, as teachers and as human beings. One of these was Miss Ethel A. Potter, who taught us biology. She carried on a research programme of her own

in her spare time, as well as arranging biology based outings for her sixth-form class, sometimes to the seaside, to look at marine life, and sometimes to research stations such as the one at Flatford Mill in Essex, which ran weekend classes for senior school pupils. It was entirely due to the excellence of her teaching that I was able to win a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford, in the autumn of 1948. Miss Potter's close friend Miss Warburton was equally outstanding in the teaching of English, and Miss Snow, of Classics, though unfortunately anyone with any ability was palmed off on her junior colleague Miss Scatcherd, a weak reed, for Latin.

Field trip. Miss Potter with Jennifer and Sally

Boarding school life existed in a world of its own, in which the girls were at the mercy of the controlling forces - the staff - 24 hours a day, and our families had delegated authority to the school for our entire wellbeing. What the parents could probably not foresee was the deadly seriousness with which the staff would attack the job as they saw it: the formation of the character of the girls into a "Westonbirt mould". Our head-mistress had been a missionary in China, and she had gathered around herself a corps of enthusiastically Christian house-mistresses, all fervent even if of different denominations, one High Anglican, another Morally ReArmed, and so on. In this surrounding, with this hyper-religious atmosphere, it is easy to see why such a serious emphasis was placed on character, and why such a large part of school life was concerned with its development. We were being prepared for a Life of Service, in which we would always think of Things Above, to quote our head mistress. From this ambition stemmed the daily and weekly routine of Matins and Vespers, Morning Prayer and Evensong, and the syllabus which made Religious Knowledge the only compulsory subject studied by all the girls. We were expected to take instruction leading to Confirmation, after which a third church service was added to our Sunday routine. As a Church of England foundation, I suppose it was to be expected. We were also regularly stirred up by visiting preachers such as the Rev. Bryan Davies, or Franciscan friar Father Charles, invited to the school to hone our religious sensibilities. (I must say though that Father Charles was a very nice man and we all really liked his visits, even if they were stir-up sessions). But it certainly seemed to me to be carrying things a bit far when in the Sixth form retreats were gradually introduced, first at school itself, and afterwards at a retreat house in Cheltenham.

These retreats were not obligatory, technically speaking, and indeed were presented to us as voluntary: of course we should have interpreted this in light of the school's special interpretation of this word. The first retreat, held at the school, included a day of silence for the participants that seemed to be almost sensuous in its emotional impact on them: they later (when they were allowed to speak again) claimed to be absolutely thrilled by it and a wave of religious mania hit the school. The handful of senior girls who had not participated found the whole experience of seeing our friends thus transformed quite creepy and alarming...it was as if we had suddenly been thrust into a nunnery as unwilling spectators of a crowd of postulants. But worse was to come, as the

residential retreat was introduced as a further treat for us. Of the whole 3-year Sixth Form only two girls dared to refuse to go. I was one of them, though even I had not imagined the consequences, for I naively believed it was a personal decision, based on conscience & permitted to me without oprobium. But I had reckoned without the staff, who were always worried about our spiritual lives. Miss Grubb called me in to her dread drawing room and asked me if I never thought about Things Above. I answered "not really", rather put out and embarrassed. How could I answer anything else, and what business was it of hers anyway? Miss Lilley sat me on a very low footstool and quite bluntly told me that I was about to go "down the drain" when I went up to the university. "Which drain", I enquired politely, again nonplussed. It was obviously time for me to get out of there, and fast! But it was not to be. I had to finish out the year in order to expunge the stain on my record at school which had resulted in my being the first girl for many years to be expelled from the Parlour, the school prefects' group. My offence was rudeness to the Sixth Form matron, Miss Pike.

The incident began the moment I returned from my Oxford interviews, when Miss P accosted me and asked me if I had the Sixth form hair dryer in the Flat, the Senior Sixth quarters, where I lived. I told her I had not. She insisted I must have. Mildly exasperated, I told her I had not washed my hair for a week, as she could see if she looked at how greasy it was. That was all. What a fuss about nothing! My mother, of course, took my side but thought I should go back to school and finish out the year to redeem my reputation. With hindsight, this seems to have been bad advice. It would have been better to have said to hell with them and gone abroad to learn languages, but of course my mother's virtuous attitude played into the school's hands, for Westonbirt had a vested interest in having girls stay on & pay their fees until the bitter end. Even a half-century later I feel that the whole business was enormously blown out of proportion. It is hard to take it really seriously. it was so obviously a trumped-up charge. What was the underlying purpose of this exercise? What was there in it for the protagonists to make them blow up this incident out of all proportion? I really felt - and still feel- that the staff had been waiting to "get" me on the religious issue, but had been waiting to upset me until after the Oxford Entrance, in case I could first bring honour to the school by winning a scholarship to Oxford, as I did that term. THEN they would have their day of reckoning! As for the supposed redemption from disgrace of sticking it out, stripped of my grey tie, it seems quite pointless in retrospect. The code of behaviour which would require me to endure a kangaroo court of my friends in the Parlour, as well as the haranguing of staff members without enough serious problems to occupy their minds seems curiously dated now, and I wonder how this whole sorry affair contributed to my redemption, and indeed if I, an obedient, well-mannered girl incapable of saying boo to a goose needed redemption at all, or whether they had erected a paper tiger out of the convoluted fastnesses of their minds, and labelled it GILLIAN FAULKNER.