

Childhood recollections of growing up in West Bilney - 1940s/50s Kevin Wilson

Having been born at the height of the 2nd world war, my earliest recollections were of our extended family. Our evacuees were Cissy and Sylvia Able, a mother and daughter from Stepney.

I recall my mother making mention of two unruly boys who proceeded the Able's; twins Edward and Trenchard, beyond my memory, but uncouth and beyond control; my mother most certainly described them in much stronger terms.

However the Ables were lovely people and the friendship formed during the war years extended for many years after; they spent summer holidays with us and we engaged in exchange visits on alternative Christmases; by then the Ables had moved to Bermondsey. From such a young age I am unable to recall if my memories were from the latter years of the war or the early exchanges after the war, but being an only child Sylvia was like my big sister.

Being war time, children's toys, if available at all, were in short supply. I can however recall my father bringing home wooden toys made by the German POWs working on the farm. They were very well made and about the only toys available at the time.

As I grew up I became aware of local personalities and trades people;



Kevin's Grandfather, Albert (Nip) Underwood and his Grandmother, Lydia. His mother is Marjorie, the baby being held, and his aunt Olive.

My grandfather Albert [Nip] Underwood was village postman, Frank Hammond the village blacksmith just around the corner from where we lived. There was also a small general store

and sweetshop operated from the cottage next to the forge; it was not unusual to spot mouse droppings on the counter! Constable Bear was the village policeman and the Reverend Gray doubled up parishes between West Bilney and East Winch.

Every Sunday, dressed in my neatly pressed short trousers, long socks and highly polished shoes, mother would insist on me accompanying her to church. The congregation would often consist of just three people in addition to mother and I. Mrs Dipper would arrive from across the Warren, on one of those high framed bicycles, dark clothes and big hat. She would frequently nod off and sleep through most of the service. For me Reverend Grays preaching's were way over my head; hopefully my mother gained some solace from the services.

Each village had its own designated "Roadman" and Albert Smith kept the roads swept, verges trimmed and drainage gully's cut between the churches at West Bilney and Pentney.

Foremen were Fiddler Brown at Game Farm and Tom Pilch at Manor Farm, whilst across the other side of the A47 the Howlings farmed a large dairy herd. Fast forward a few years and I recall visits to the dairy each evening with two enamel milk cans, waiting for the cows to be milked for our regular supply. Later we became more self-sufficient; my father owned two goats and for many years it was goat's milk on cereal and in drinks. Indeed can recall shaking a very large jar, making ones arms ache, as we looked to supplement our supply of butter.

School days arrived, and for a few months a taxi service was arranged to transport the younger of the West Bilney children to Pentney School. In addition to myself, Phillip Bix "Tich" [in later years to become a notorious slow and uncompromising tractor driver] and George Bond were entitled to a taxi service.

But there were older children attending Pentney School from West Bilney; Margaret Curl, Derek Curl, Hazel, Douglas and Jeffery Curl [cousins to Margaret and Derek] Robin Bix and Michael Dye. Following on a few years or so later were Olive Rocket [from Old School Cottages] Roy Mobbs and the youngest of the Curl family, Anne.

Nearby Game Farm Cottage was for many years occupied by the Wright family, George, Ruby and Valerie; though the first occupants that I can recall were Alf Dye and family. Alf, in addition to being a farm worker, was, at weekends, also the village barber, and during the war years ARP warden. I can vaguely recall that being fitted with a child's gas mask scared me stiff and remember my mother telling me later that I went red in the face and almost screamed the house down.

At home I thought we were very modern. Unlike many other families at the time, who drew their drinking water from convenient nearby wells, we had a large hand pump in our farmhouse kitchen. My father and another farm worker would come in every day around 9am and spend a good 30 to 45 minutes swinging the big wooden handle back and forth pumping water from an underground supply to a tank in the loft. Yes, we were very modern. our water arrived via a tap. Eventually the hand pump was replaced by a petrol driven pump mounted in a little concrete pump house immediately above the well.

On entering the village the first block of three houses on the left were served for water by a well. This block was a real family affair; Retired Major Manning occupied the first house,

and the his two daughters, Daisy and Lilley, who married the brothers Curl , Percy and Bill, occupied the middle and other end cottage.

A short distance further along a second block was occupied by families, Skillings, Hobbs, and the Bonds, who made off down to the river for their fresh water supply.

Fred Skillings was employed by Frank Howling the farmer of Church Farm and best know as the driver of the steam traction engine hired out by Howlings at harvest time to drive the thrashing drum on other farms.

“Tottie” Hobbs, (never did know her real name), like my father kept goats and several hens and sold eggs in the village; I am not certain but have a feeling she maybe also kept pigs.

Long since closed, the old West Bilney School situated along the Pentney Road (Paws Lane] had been converted into farm workers cottages and occupied at the front, on the left, by Tom and Elsie Pilch, the Manor Farm foreman, and my grandmother (Nana Wilson) and my three bachelor uncles Will, Albert and Jack on the right hand side. Will was generally known as “Podgy” and Albert as “Cally”.



Picture shows Albert (Calley) Wilson

Several years later I quizzed my father as to where the nickname Cally had come from? Reply. “Wu wen he wus yung he had a hid uh thick cally hair”.

Will, “Podgy”, was a real character, a renowned bee keeper, having won competitions for his honey. He also taught himself to play piano and violin. When Nana Wilson died Podgy took over as cook and housekeeper, in addition to still working of course. He not only cooked everyday meals for himself and his two brothers, but also became proficient at baking bread, cakes and pastries.

A family named Shackcloth lived at the rear of the Old School cottages with daughter Olive. Old School Cottages underwent another conversion several years later to become the new Manor Farm House and, as it is today, the home of Nicolaas Velzeboer and family.

As I entered early teens, I felt the need to increase my pocket money and, as most children of my age, sought out an income outside school hours. My first ever job was leading a horse

between the rows of sugar beet whilst an experienced farm hand guided the blades of the hoe at the rear. My job “hoss ho leading” as it was termed.

My hours were 4pm to 6pm each evening and 8am to 12 midday on Saturday. If not required in the fields on a Saturday I would “muck out” the stables; payment at 2 shillings per hour was far better than my apprentice electrician wage a couple of years later.



Picture shows Kevin Wilson - about 18 years old.

I recall Speedway garage was owned by Fred Bacon, Roy Bacon’s father, before being sold to the Barnbrook family. The Barnbrooks really smartened the garage and filling station, opened a café cum shop to replace the since closed outlet adjacent to the forge. Sid Barnbrook had three attractive daughters who used to serve in the shop and café. Needless to say I was ever eager to offer my services to anyone requiring an errand to the shop or garage.

One dark evening around 8pm, our usual family routine was interrupted by a very loud bang, an explosive type of bang. We opened the back door to see flames, over by the church wall, leaping high into the air; my father went to investigate and came back to report a motor cycle had ridden straight into the wall at speed. I think my memory is correct in recalling the inquest following the accident recorded a verdict of suicide.

The bend in the wall as it turns from A47 into Paws Lane still shows the evidence today of the rebuild. Until this occurrence the church wall housed the village post box, which was demolished in the crash, and, when replaced, repositioned on a designated post outside Game Farm Cottage.