



R.I.P. Alec Laurence, President, Tenterden & District Local History Society

I regret to inform members of the death of our President, Alec Laurence, very unexpectedly on 14th March 2017. Alec had contributed much to knowledge of Tenterden's history and had remained a significant contributor to discussions and, indeed, exploration "in the field" until very recently. He will be missed and our best wishes go to Joan and to their daughters at this difficult time.

Nick Hudd
Chairman

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF TENTERDEN

In the early 1930s my parents rented half a house called Burren (next door to the present Jenners) in Ashford Road. It belonged to Mrs Lindsell a very sweet person. She had a wonderful garden at the back and this gave me my first introduction to flowers. My mother kept 10 chickens at the bottom of the garden so we had to feed them and collect the eggs. Then, just before the War, we moved to 8 East Cross. This time we had a large house and small garden. On the first day in the new house I was exploring the rockery when I met a large toad, which frightened me. Even today, I do not like them. He did not turn into a prince as the fairy stories had told me.

My grandparents on my mother's side lived at 2 High Street in a house called Eastwell. Half of the front was my grandfather's (Hugh Willsher Snr) grocery shop and behind there were greenhouses which were part of a market garden of about six acres. The front on the other side was occupied by Harry Judge, an auctioneer and estate agent who was Hugh Willsher's brother-in-law. It was a massive property with attics and a wash house with a copper for doing the Monday washing. There was endless space to play and have fun in the garden with friends – camps were made – games of tracking and spies were played – we were on the go all the time. In 1940 we had a lot of snow and tobogganed in Edwards' field, at the rear, whizzing down towards the railway station at 6 o'clock at night in moonlight. I still love snow to this day.



The girls in my parents' office in the front of 8 East Cross had been teaching me the alphabet so it was suggested that I started school. So as a four year old I started at Penderel, in Ashford Road (No 37). On the first day my mother came and picked me up from school with the pram. I was so disgusted and humiliated that I refused to get into it and told her off. Penderel was a private school taking pupils from 4-14, with 14 being the school leaving age at that time. Miss McCowan Hall was headmistress of the school and employed several female teachers some of whom had been pupils at the school. It gave a wonderful grounding for the three Rs, Music, Sport, PE and life in general.

On school days my cousin and a friend, Mary, came home to lunch with me. As Mary's parents were farming at Rolvenden, it was too far for her to go home for lunch and then come back for the afternoon. For giving her lunch, my mother received a kilner jar of skim milk as payment each week. Food was rationed at that time and rationing was not completely lifted until 1953. We had a religious service at school on Wednesday afternoons which was either taken by the Baptist Minister or the town Curate. The few Roman Catholic children who attended school went for religious teaching with Father Currie who was the priest at the Roman Catholic Church up the road (by the future entrance to Turners Avenue). As the country was at war, the classroom windows were covered in chicken netting!

In 1928 my father had started a road transport business in Appledore Road (where William Judge Close is today). When war came children had to be kept safe whilst bombs were dropping and sirens sounding. My cousin, Ron, lived next door to the business and he and I used to travel around with my father. My father was also in the Royal Observer Corps and spent many hours on duty. The observation post was where the Tenterden Junior School is today. In 1940, with fewer trees obstructing the view, one could see the coast of France. My job was to deliver his lunch – often carrying rice pudding in a basket and not trying not to spill it

onto the ground. As part of his business, my father also transported timber and it was always great fun seeing a lorry being pulled out if it got stuck in muddy woods.

During the early part of the war every home was assessed for which part of the building was safest. Our dining room at the back of the house was chosen as the safest part. Two telegraph poles were erected with a piece of timber between them to reinforce the ceiling. My mother decided to drape some yellow material round them because she could not accept that one could have bare poles in a dining room!! In 1940 we were issued with a Morrison shelter. This was an iron table with wire round the legs and up the sides. This also went into the dining room near the window which had sandbags around. This is where my parents and I slept when the bombing was at its worse. One night the windows were blown out of the front of the house and the roof rose up but settled back down again. This can be seen by looking at the building. The Georgian house built circa 1740 stood the blast well. One morning a doodle bug fell in the field down Sandy Lane. I was with my father down the Appledore Road. For safety, he pushed me under a wood saw bench. My mother who was at home received the other side of the blast which blew open the front door and the hall mirror slid off the wall but unbelievably did not break. My father's transport business had two furniture removal vans. When, in the early part of the war, it was thought an invasion was imminent, one removal van was earmarked to remove the patients from Kench Hill Nursing Home at Leigh Green, whilst the other would have taken me, my mother and two grandmothers to Scotland. Fortunately this did not happen.

By 1942, after the shock of war and the bombing in 1940, the town started to come to life again. Hugh Willsher Jnr produced Nativity and Passion plays in St Mildred's Church where the Rev Douglas William Carmichael was the vicar. Dressing up took place in the nearby vicarage which was a barn of a place and as coal was rationed there was no heat. I was in one of the Nativity plays and remember dashing across the churchyard in my pyjamas to appear on the stage which was constructed in front of the rood screen. There was no scenery but lighting and sound effects were organised by Frank Rutherford, one of my father's employees, whilst John Ticehurst who ran the Choral Society and lived at Huson was in charge of music.

The Embassy Cinema had opened in 1937 having replaced the one which was where the Fairings at East Cross is today. The first film that I was taken to see was 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. The films changed once a week with a main feature film and a smaller film together Pathe News, which was generally six weeks old before it came to Tenterden. The news film showing the finding of the Belsen Concentration Camp had an impact on me which was never to be forgotten.

Many of you will remember the radio entertainment of the 1940s. There was Grandma Buggins' War Time Recipes, Playtime with Elsie and Doris Waters and Tommy Handley with ITMA (It's That Man Again). Dick Barton was not to be missed between 6.45 and 7 pm each evening as also was Norman and Henry Bones on Children's Hour which was introduced by Uncle Mac. Our imagination had to work overtime in those days with no visual assistance.

With the ending of the War in Europe, I remember the excitement of victory night and staying up seeing all the people in the high street and watching them dance outside the Town Hall. I also remember a street party outside the Town Hall where we sat down at trestles with mothers trying to find enough food for us. Church bells started to ring again with mixed blessings for I had a friend Jill who stayed with her grandparents at the Woolpack Hotel, next to the church, in the school holidays. The noise of the bells was deafening in her bedroom. Later on her grandparents had a black and white television set which was the first that I had seen. We were allowed to bake jacket potatoes on the Aga and eat them whilst watching television between 7-8 pm. In 1948 Tenterden was invited to take the Town Model to Alexandra Palace for it to be shown on television. There was also an interview with George Reeves on Goal Running, a strange game of tag to me which was played on the Recreation Ground.

It might be worth mentioning that after the War a considerable amount of soft fruit was grown locally and this was transported to the Borough and Covent Garden markets in London by my father's firm before road transport was nationalised. Being a luxury, it sold well for several years. With the loaded lorries leaving Tenterden at 3 am in the morning, they would chug up Wrotham Hill on the A20 at a very low speed. This gave time for the driver's mate to shoot any rabbits showing up in the lorries' headlights – food being in very short supply. Strangely enough, I felt quite safe during the War. Was it because there was plenty of countryside around Tenterden for the bombs to fall? Tenterden had a population of around 3000 at the time and everybody seemed to know one another. We were told not to take sweet from strangers! However, there were few strangers and no sweets. These were days of innocence.

Beryl Booth

Look at old film of Tenterden by searching for "Bill Parsons' Film Archive" on YouTube