

My 1940s childhood

Carol Cross (nee Carter)



My brother Roy and I were born in 1940 and 1941 at no. 68 Whitecross, the first bungalow opposite Blagrove Edge, next to the Air Ministry field (now the Air Training Corp), so very close to the wartime airfield. The photograph below shows us in mum's hand knitted pixie bonnet and balaclava helmet playing in the 1947 winter snow.



I'd spent 6 weeks in Abingdon isolation hospital ward with scarlet fever prior to starting Wootton School in January 1947. Dad pushed me on his bike that first morning through the snow up Lamborough Hill which had been cleared by the snow plough previously.

I recall the headmaster Mr Mitchell picking me up and showing me around. I was somewhat in awe as he was rather shaky and seemed to have a lot of whiskers!

My first years were spent in the infant's classroom under the teacher Mrs. Fuller who lived in Sandleigh Road. She always wore lots of jewellery, mainly beady necklaces and earrings. She always seemed to be tapping her ruler for our attention – and if not, it was “hands on heads” time. The classroom was somewhat oppressive, with high Victorian walls and windows too high up to see out of. The floor was bare wooden boards and rather dusty. I longed for playtimes and to get outside and away from smelly plasticine and squeaky slates.

After two years, I went into Miss Cox's class in the middle of the school, which was divided by glass partitions from the infants and upper juniors. Miss Cox lived with her married sister, Mabel Capel in Fox Lane so either walked across the fields through Old Boars Hill or cycled on her “Sit up and beg” bike. She was a very prim and proper Edwardian lady and always walked very upright into quite late age. She had a lot of patience and seemed to take a liking to me who was mainly attentive and listened to what she had to say. I learned to sew under her tuition and hand-stitch a baby's bib for my married sister's baby, after lots of practice of course. We always finished school with putting our hands together and she'd say a prayer, us joining in with “Amen”. Most memorable was her hiding behind the blackboard every so often, to retrieve her handkerchief which was hidden up her knicker leg! We did lots of singing with her playing the piano – besides of course the “3 Rs”. Scripture was an important subject being a church school and every so often a Mr Pixel came out from Oxford to examine the class on their religious knowledge, for which there was a prize.



Carol Cross (Carter) – back row, second child from teacher Mrs Fuller.

Diana Rench holding board.

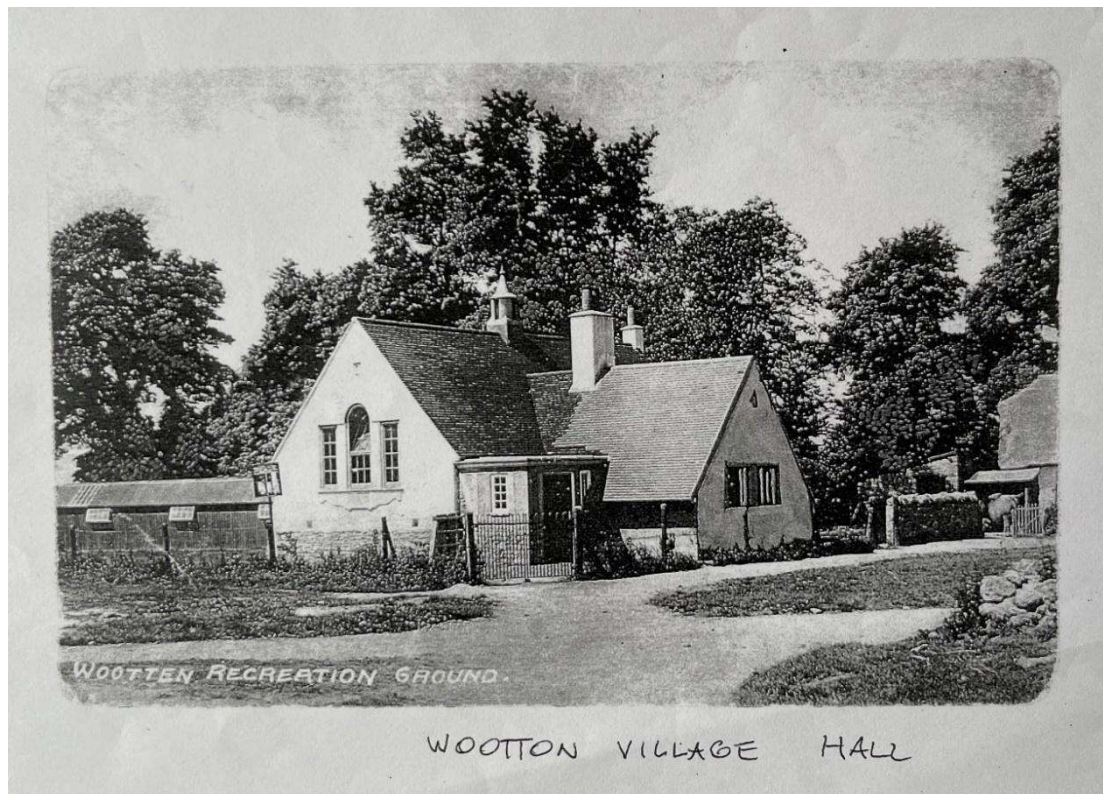
Sally Keeble (friend) – middle row, second from end.

During winter, Anthracite was burned in the fireplace with a strong metal guard surrounding it. Our 1/3rd pint of milk was sometimes thawed out and warmed here if it was particularly cold. I remember sitting at the heavy wooden desk complete with inkwell and using the scratchy pens, hoping the nib hadn't crossed since it had last been used. Ink had to be refilled every so often and of course there were accidents – I recall spilling some spilt on my dress once and trying to disguise the fact from Mum when it came to washday.



Boars Hill Primary School (1905?)

I loved getting to know so many children in school as where we lived we were quite socially isolated from what was going on in the world (as I thought). Mum was very Victorian in outlook and we were very aware children “were seen and not heard”. Things opened up a bit when I got older and learned to ride a bike to school instead of the daily walk back and forth. This meant during the summer months I could join in a few activities in the village with school friends – going to GFS (Girls Friendly Society) which was run by Nancy and Margaret Lovett in the Victorian Village Hall just behind the village green (since demolished in the late 1960s).



Also, I'd made friends with Sally who lived at the bottom of Sandy Lane and lived a more refined life style than the one I'd come from! They had a car and were on the telephone (though it was a shared line with neighbour Mr Candy). Only our new headmaster, Mr Nurton had such things, so in my eyes they were in an elevated position. Sally and I spent many happy hours playing in her wooden Wendy House built by her father, getting "dressed up" from the wonderful dressing up trunk! We often went off exploring across the footpath leading to the "Fuzz" (Furze) field which came out by Jarn Mound. She seemed to have free range of everywhere around Wootton and Boars Hill and appeared to be quite fearless – exploring with me in tow. I remember being petrified of snakes and having nearly stepped on one, went screaming down Sandy Lane with my mouth wide open and swallowed a fly!

We often wondered who the strange couple were who passed down Sandy Lane whilst we were playing. He was a very tall, foreign-looking gentleman, followed two paces behind by a pale-faced Edwardian-dressed lady. I've since learnt that he was Ali Akba Daryush from Persia and his wife Elizabeth Daryush, daughter of English poet laureate Robert Bridges. They lived at 'Stockwell' and the grounds were bequeathed to become known as 'Elizabeth Daryush Gardens'. They are both interred in Wootton churchyard.

Sally's near neighbours were the Rench family who farmed at Mayo's Farm (later the 'Cattery'). Diana and her brother Richard were our class mates at school. Diana was a very clever studious girl and went on to pass the 11 Plus exam which was no surprise to most of us, who were destined to the Abingdon Secondary Modern or Boxhill schools. The family farmed cattle, pigs, sheep, hens and ducks. Diana, besides school work, had to deliver lots of eggs to the villagers. I remember they had a bull in a bull pen which was quite close to the road – he always appeared to be looking at you, so I always ran as fast as I could out of his sight.

The farm had two Shire horses for work, named Dawn and Queenie. They used to pull carts down through the village and were stabled in yards opposite the school - now Stile House, home of our vicar. "Spot" Boswell, a former pupil of the school used to lead them. Spot was named as such because he had a spot of mud on his face, as I am told by my schoolfriend Diana Rench, her father employing him on the farm. His sisters, Gwen and Phyllis, both worked as cooks in the school during the 1980s and 1990s. Being housed so close to school, we children were very used to farmyard smells!

The school playground was very small during my school days – only tarmac on the front facing the road and a side strip by Candy's field. At the rear of the playground behind a brick wall were the bucket toilets known by everyone as 'The Offices'. These of course had to be emptied at least once a week in the playground sump by Mr Nurton. I know that there are earlier records in the school log book of "the horse taking fright and bolting, with the contents being spilt down the road".

During lunchtimes and better weather our play area was extended by being allowed to cross the road and over the stile to Renche's fields known as "The Football Field". This was great fun as there was a small stream with willow and elm trees to climb. My brother tells me he climbed right to the top of one of the elms with his pal – I'm sure Health and Safety hadn't been heard of in those days – and Mum never got to hear about it either! At 1:30pm, Mr Nurton blew his whistle and we all returned inside.

Playtimes

Some children brought balls, skipping ropes, whips and tops and '5 stones' to school. There were lots of improvised games too – 'What's the Time Mr. Wolf?', Hop Scotch, Leapfrog, Conkers and handstands against the school wall.

Once you were too old to stay in Miss Cox's class, we went up into the top class under the new headmaster, Mr Nurton (affectionately known as 'Pop Nurton'). He joined school in April 1947 after being in the Second World War. We children didn't realise then that he had suffered from shell shock – so hadn't known why he would occasionally have to jump up and down and rub his hands furiously together.

We had more daylight in this room with windows on two sides of the classroom – one looking onto the garden of the school house. During late summer we could smell the perfume from the Balsam Poplar trees in neighbouring old Miss Jowit's garden.

We had maps and wall charts and a really large clock on one of the walls. Everything was done with the aid of the blackboard and chalk and a long pointing stick. We also had a radio for the occasional lesson. Schoolwork became a bit more difficult in this class and I found decimalisation quite a mystery. However, we were well taught in chanting the times tables, knowing how many pence in the pound, etc. spelling and writing compositions. Mr Nurton was quite encouraging in all we did and instilled in us a sense of duty and honesty.

Very occasionally, we had the opportunity of seeing an educational black and white film shown to us in the village hall. One in particular stuck in my mind – don't speak to strange men!

Until the end of the 1940s we children had to have our school dinners in the village hall. They were transported in a small blue van from Wantage in various metal containers. They were awful and most unappetizing and I probably thrived only if they had a nice pudding.

A year or so later, the school house becoming vacant, Mr Nurton employed a Mrs Rivers (Daisy) to become school cook and we were served really lovely (edible) food at last. I can still taste the homemade salad cream and mashed potatoes! Most memorably, Mrs Harding and Mrs Mathews (from the local council homes) were our dinner ladies.

We children were generally well behaved, but occasionally someone stepped out of line (usually a boy!) and they were taken into the cloakroom to receive punishment with a small stick which had previously been burnt at the end. Misdemeanours were usually issued for swearing, throwing stones, or fighting. This punishment then had to be entered into a special book recording the event.

Sometimes pupils were excluded from school if they had an infection such as impetigo, measles, scarlet fever or nits. At least once a year, we had a visit from the 'nit nurse' who also inspected our hands I believe (no nail polish in those days!). We were fortunate to have just opposite school 'The Hermitage', the District Nurse's house – Nurse Tidd, Nurse Martin and Nurse Donovan. They came to our rescue if there was a wasp sting or difficult splinter to remove.

Some children lived close enough to go home for dinner, and when I was eleven, used to ride home then as we had 1½ hours. One lunchtime, accompanying one girl (Sheila Etwell) riding with her younger brother on the back of her bike, he managed to get his leg tangled up in her back wheel. Quickly thinking, I ran and knocked at the door of 'The Old Barn House' rousing the elderly lady to come and help. However, much to my relief (and hers, I'm sure) a dustbin lorry was just coming up the road and two men appeared with 'suitable' tools, wire cutters I think – and proceeded to clip the bike spokes and release the screaming child. I have never forgotten this incident to this day – and much to my amazement, met the chap at the University of the Third Age (U3A) who remembered the incident still. Co-incidentally, I bumped into him again more recently when he mentioned he'd got a grandchild attending Wootton School during the time I was actually working there.

Come September, I can still picture the old gentleman dressed in plus fours, tweed jacket and flat cap, carrying over this deep basket of rosy red apples from his home opposite the school, 'Manor House'. We were each allowed to select one apple to take home – they seemed to smell so fragrant I remember. There was an orchard in their huge garden, complete with tennis court. This was Mr Enthoven, who had two adult daughters. Dorothy was our Sunday School teacher and was really kind. We were invited into their house for a Christmas party; I'd never seen such a beautiful sparkly tree and decorations. Dorothy and our vicar, Mr Gibbs took us on several Sunday School trips out. One was a steam trip from Abingdon to Days Lock, where we climbed up the steep Wittenham Clumps. Another visit was to Whipsnade Zoo, where I had a ride on an elephant fitted with seating for eight children.



Pupils from 1946/47 intake in final years.

Carol Carter (Cross) 4th girl from left (sitting). Diana Rench standing next to Mr. Nurton (headmaster).

School always attended church on Saints' Days and special festivals. I vividly remember attending that cold, February day when our late Queen's father, George 6th, died in 1952. Services seemed very long and we had to kneel for ages. There was lots of genuflecting and body crossing. Incense was burnt and swung from a chained container, and a bell was rung at an important moment during the Communion service. I didn't realise at the time this was very similar to a Roman Catholic service, as my sister had married into a Catholic family.

When we were in our final years at school, Mr Nurton took us up to London to visit the 'Festival of Britain'. This was in 1951 and we saw the Skylon, the Dome of Discovery and the Royal Festival Hall. We travelled from Abingdon Railway Station (now the site of Waitrose) on the 'Radley Bunk', then changed trains to get to Paddington Station. It was a long, tiring day and I was dying of thirst when we arrived back in Abingdon – while we were waiting for our coach home, I remember seeing a hoarding advertisement for Ki-Ora Orange Squash! We also had a coach trip with school to either Bognor or Southsea during one summer.

We enjoyed the summer months when we could go outdoors and practice country dancing, using a wind-up gramophone. Also popular was Maypole dancing. This led to the older children joining other primary schools in the Abbey Grounds in Abingdon – this was one of the highlights of the year.

There was also an annual music festival in Abingdon's Corn Exchange, where we sang our hearts out, competing with other primary schools in the County. I'm not sure we ever won any accolades, but we certainly aired our lungs in trying!

Often, on our way home from school, we would go into Hatt's Bakery to buy a loaf of bread – or the occasional 'Fatty Cake' (oozing with grease and fruit). This cost half a crown (2/6) so was not very often. I can still picture Mr Hatt now with his enormous hands and a big white apron in that semi-dark, warm bakehouse. He had an assistant, Mr Boswell, father of 'Spot' and his other siblings who we went to school with. Mr Hatt had two daughters, Joyce and June and a son, David. The adult girls, delivered bread around the villages from a little van – I remember them with their big baskets delivering to us at Whitecross. Joyce became a very good friend of mine later in life – she was also the church organist for many years. David was a 'server' at church and used to swing the incense.

If we had time we would pop into the 'rec' opposite the church – it was nothing very grand then, just four swings set into a hard concrete base, a slide, and a pole with several chains hanging from the top, where you could whirl yourself around. You could hear the chains clanking from quite a distance away.

One of our school managers (or governors) was a very gracious lady, Freda Holroyd who lived on Boars Hill. She used to visit various folk in the neighbourhood selling savings stamps for the war effort. She loved children and was Godmother to a number of the local children, including myself. She always gave me a big 'bear hug' and called me 'darling'. I was not too keen on her real fox head stole staring at me in her embrace. Unfortunately, some time in the 1980s she was tied up and robbed at home - she lived alone and in somewhat of a secluded area. Happily she was unhurt and lived to tell the tale, having read about it in the local paper. In later years, at her funeral, I realised there was the Archbishop of Canterbury at the service – so she had good connections!

Opposite the church was the British Legion cricket field and I recall a flower show and fete one summer. A big marquee was erected and a good array of home produced flowers, vegetables and fruit displayed. Later in the day these were auctioned off and I summoned up the courage to bid for a bunch of colourful Antirrhinums to take home to mum – probably all of my pocket money spent! There were other various attractions including 'bowling for the pig'. I believe Brigadier Gordon, his wife and daughter attended, plus of course several of their Dachshund dogs who seemed to be always yapping and running around.

During the school holidays, I used to go with mum to some of the local Wootton and Boars Hill houses where mum was a 'char lady'. One of the ladies had beautiful ball gowns hung in her wardrobe, as she used to sing with a famous dance band up in London. I know her husband was a Squadron Leader. They had quite an orchard of fruit and offered mum the contents of a Bramley apple tree. I shall never forget looking up through the branches, as one huge apple scored a 'bullseye' on my eye, so I suffered a black eye for days after.

I was thrilled to bits with earning 1/6 (one shilling and sixpence) at a house on Boars Hill for cleaning the silver cutlery when I was about eleven years old. Mum had some really lovely employers who became good friends and kept in touch for many years later.

Shops and Shopping

Trips to the shops were few, as we had to walk or cycle up Lamborough Hill. When really young, I sat behind mum on a child's seat while she did the peddling. This was usually once a week to visit Mr. Downer's Grocery shop and Post Office. This was on the first corner of Besselsleigh and Sandleigh Road. Joan Keep, a past pupil from Wootton School, served at the Post Office counter behind a brass grill. Loose biscuits were served from a large open tin into PAPER BAGS! Mr Downer always wore a brown coat-style overall, complete with brown Trilby hat.

Later on, he employed a delivery boy, Bill Clarke , from a large family who attended Wootton School. He had a bike with a very large basket on the front, so he must have pedalled quite a few miles, as he came down to Whitecross also. In time, when the shop changed hands for the third time, Bill was able to take it on as owner, and we all remember the delicious ham he used to home-cook and sell and slice on the bacon slicer – he used to say, “Thick or thin today Mrs Carter?”. Unfortunately, we could only ever afford a quarter of a pound (4 ounces).

We did have a butcher, Mr Buzzard, where the One Stop Shop is now. Meat was rather short and expensive during the War years – so I guess sausage meat was on the menu several times a week in some households. One very occasional treat was liver – which I really loved as it didn't have any bones in it! Later, his son and daughter ran a greengrocery/grocery shop next door. Further along, there was a hairdressers run by Mr Gardiner. I loved the metal clippers running up the back of my neck; as I always had to have short hair. I'd have loved to have grown long hair and have plaits!

We always had a Newsagent, Dennis Barton who took over from the hairdressers when they left to emigrate to South Africa I believe. Beautiful birthday cards were displayed in the window and inside rows of big jars of sweets along shelves. Of course, sweets were rationed for a very long time then so were very much a rare treat.

There was a shop/off licence further down Whitecross opposite the pillar box. This post box I got to visit often as mum was an avid letter writer to various members of the family.

I have a black/white postcard showing the shop with virtually no traffic on the road. It was written on by 'London Granny' (dad's mum) who used to send

smelly parcels containing magazines and kippers. We knew what they contained when you saw the grease! Still it was the thought that counted.

Little did I know that very many years later I would be returning yet again to Wootton School for another reason.

