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A Moment in Time: Manuden in wartime

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The last few household possessions had been securely lifted into Mr Horley's van and my mother had gone back to the cottage to lock the front door. She tried the handle again to make sure it was locked then put the key in an envelope, together with a note for Charlie. She walked briskly to his door and pushed it underneath. Walking back past our cottage she took one last look through the front window, hesitated a little, then turned and walked quite quickly down the path to the removal van.

As she was helped up by Mr Horley's assistant to take her place beside me on the small settee that had been securely placed at the rear of the van my ten year old eyes met hers. Neither of us were sad but we both realised, at the moment of parting, that this was the end of an experience that would live forever in our memories. We didn't speak, we didn't have to; our eyes said it all.

We had arrived at the cottage on a balmy summer's day in the early summer of 1944. My father was in the army and my mother was determined to leave London and the growing menace of the Doodlebugs. This led her to scour the advertisements in the *Farmers Weekly* for jobs and cottages and she finally found one. It was one of a small terrace of three on the top of a hill, called Mount Pleasant, in Manuden, Essex, which she got rent free in return for a few hours a week working in the farmhouse of the farmer who owned the cottage. It was an ideal arrangement.

Our stay was to last just over two years. Two years of undiluted and unforgettable pleasure. There were four of us; my Mother, my Aunt Eadie, my brother

Ken aged 6 and myself aged 8. Aunt Eadie was my grandmother's younger sister and although she was about 20 years older than my mother their relationship was like that of two laughing, loving and extremely happy sisters. Their joy was infectious. My mother had a trained soprano voice and was always singing. And Aunt Eadie, ever observant, joking and laughing was a perfect foil to my mother's extravagant theatricality. The little four roomed cottage was a cocoon of intense happiness from one day to the next. It was difficult to believe there was a war on.

We soon settled in. My brother Ken insisted on sleeping in the same bedroom as my mother and Aunt Eadie which meant that I had the front bedroom all to myself. My window overlooked the lane that ran past the cottage so I could quickly look out on to what was going up or down it. Only when my father came home on leave was my peace disturbed.

The cottage had no running water, no electricity, no inside toilet and the only heating was from the large iron oven in the living room. None of these limitations made the slightest impact on our general state of contentment. Our cottage was our castle, a place of absolute satisfaction.

I was put in charge of emptying the toilet bucket when it got filled. This entailed digging a very deep hole in the garden and filling it with the buckets content. Our garden produced some wonderful vegetables. Then there was the trimming of the oil lamps wicks and the fetching of water from the standpipe in the lane. I also became the expert at tuning in the radio when we had remembered to get the battery charged. All these things introduced me to the responsibilities of running a home and the needs of family life. At eight years of age I was the man about the house.

Ken and I were enrolled in the village school which was about a mile and a quarter from the cottage. We never missed a day's attendance. It was a typical rural school; two forms catering for all ages from five to fourteen. There were two mistresses; one was quite young and rather pretty who doubled up as the Head and upper form teacher; the other was a nice older lady who taught the lower form. When I was nine I was moved to the upper form and must have been something of a premature adolescent; nothing seemed to escape my attention and my desire to learn occupied all my waking hours. I was known in the family as 'The Critic' and 'The Boy with Ears on Elastic'. My eyes were often trained on the teacher. She was attractive and dressed in stylish clothes; she lived in a cottage opposite the school. On one occasion, she leaned over my desk to correct some of my work and as I looked up I was confronted by the sight of her two perfectly formed beautiful pendulous creamy white breasts. This didn't take my breath away, at nine years of age I was still too immature for that, but it lodged in my memory as a frozen moment of indelible recognition. I remember it as a moment of magical revelation.

At this turning point in my life nothing of beauty or interest escaped my attention; the elegance of the Cornflower; the song of the Blackbird; the crystallised snow on the branches of trees and the vivacity of my teacher. All these things produced thrilling sights and sounds and a growing awareness of the sheer pleasure of observation and discovery.

Harvest time produced a flood of new and exciting incidents. It was the highlight of the farming year which happily coincided with the school holidays. For me the harvest time days were days of adventure. I would be up at the crack of dawn or as soon as I heard horses or farm workers going up or down the lane. Washed, changed, a quick breakfast and I was off for the day with the packed lunch prepared by my mother. She might not see me until the evening, sometimes not until dusk.

What a magical time this was. We would be told in the evening what field would be cut the next day and that is where we all met. Either a tractor, but more usually a horse, would be pulling the reaper and binder which cut the crop and spewed out a continuous flow of ripened corn. A small army followed gathering an arm full then tying it up into sheaves and then forming them into stooks. Wheat, barley and oats were all gathered in during three or four hectic weeks and the whole village seemed to be mobilised in the effort, myself amongst them.

We were also joined by a small group of five or six Landgirls who brought a welcome element of fun and carefree exuberance to the energy and enthusiasm of the day's efforts. These girls were wonderful, everybody liked them and I enjoyed being with them. On one occasion, during our break for lunch, I took food from my bag and when I opened one of the packets discovered my mother had included a cold kipper. This was spotted by one of the girls who almost screamed with delight when she saw it. 'Oh a kipper', she said. 'I haven't seen one of those for years'. 'You have it', I said. 'My mother has probably got others'. I gave it to her and watched her eat it as though it were a rare delicacy. The humble kipper raised to a mouth watering delicacy.

The same girl was with me on the top of a cart one day helping to stack sheaves as they were handed up to us. We were joined by one of the young farm workers who started to joke with her and then playfully chased her as though trying to pull off her bra. She ran, laughing and screaming around the cart, a mixture of fear and delight. But I could see when it was all over that she had enjoyed the pursuit.

Then there were the Prisoners of War. The Germans were surly and didn't seem to like children. The Italians were the opposite, they loved children. They were happy and carefree and obviously pleased to be out of the war. I spent my time with them and if I had a spare boiled egg, tomato or sandwich, I would give it to them. We became friends.

My mother would occasionally come to see me in the fields and if she stopped for any length of time she would quickly become the centre of attention with her laughter singing and jokes. An audience for my mother was an invitation to perform, a half dozen people was enough but two or three thousand much better. She basked in applause and was like a person transformed.

When harvest was over I would be out roaming and exploring the countryside around our cottage. The woods and fields were constantly changing inhabited by a revolving cast of animals, birds and all kinds of insects. Then there were the flowers; the stunning reds of the poppies; the statuesque teasel and the springtime glory of the daffodils and violets. It was all, for me, a moving panorama of discovery and pleasure. In the summer, when harvest was over and the fields were reduced to stubble, I would lie down and gaze into the sky listening to the larks overhead singing and hovering in the rays of the burning sun. I might be alone for long periods but not solitary. How could I be with the natural world around me so full of surprise and familiar pleasures?

We also had neighbours, Tommy Tant and Charlie Start. I spent many hours with them both listening to their stories of country life and what it had been like when they were young. They both spoke with rich East Anglian accents and had a lot of dialect words common to their part of the country. Both came from long lines of agricultural people who had probably lived in the same area for centuries. They were a great help to my mother and always responded when help was needed.

Tommy was about 70 and retired and something of a dandy. He was tallish, as country people go, with a jolly and relaxed temperament. He and his wife owned a pair of cottages about a hundred yards further up the lane from us. They lived in one and rented the other out to a family who occasionally came to it for the weekend. His wife, Jess, was a retired teacher. They had married late in life and had no family. Local gossip said Jess had married below herself but that was just plain nastiness. Tommy was a clever man who made a good income from the land around his cottage. He bred rabbits, chickens, pigeons and ferrets, had a small orchard and grew vegetables and flowers. Both he and his wife had pensions (the village people seemed to know everything about their neighbours' lives) and he had an income from his small piece of land and the cottage. He also had a pony and trap and on special occasions he would come down the lane in it with Jess at his side. Tommy would be in his Sunday best; watch chain across his waistcoat and a buttonhole in his lapel; a Trilby - never a cap - on his head. Jess would be sitting demurely beside him prettily but conservatively dressed and would sometimes hold a posy or a bunch of flowers. They would both smile and wave at onlookers as they passed by and all, they and us, got pleasure out of the occasion.

Charlie on the other hand was the genuine rustic article. A bit younger than Tommy, but still working, he was not just a conservative man he was steeped in folklore and regarded life as mysterious beyond belief. He seemed to my child's eyes, when walking home across the field behind our cottage after a long day's work, to be an extension of the earth he trod on. He was of medium height, slightly built and walked with a steady gait. His clothing had the appearance of a uniform. Tweed jacket over a waistcoat and a collarless shirt; trousers of corduroy held up at the knees in bad weather by string to keep the bottoms dry. And always with a cap on his head which he never seemed to take off. Did he wear it in bed I wondered? At moments like this and in his stout leather boots he looked as though he had existed since the day of creation itself. In fact there was evidence of his descent from the bowmen of England for he carried in his two back pockets a catapult and half a dozen small ball bearings. A rabbit or pheasant would cross his path at their peril; he was a deadly shot.

He was a good gardener, kept cage birds and carved wood, I have a small fan still that he carved from apple wood. His needs were simple and he was almost self sufficient, as most country people then were. Folklore was, for him, a virtual religion, and you ignored it at your peril. Even at eight and nine years old I sensed that this attitude was a bit outdated. As for women he said he 'Couldn't abide 'em'. He was a confirmed bachelor and, he said, 'determined to remain so'. This determination must have waned because we learnt not long after we had left that he had got married. But the shock to his system must have been too much. After two years of married life he died. Tommy and Charlie were as different from one another as chalk and cheese but I liked them both, and learnt from them whilst enjoying their company.

As the war moved towards its end Aunt Eadie decided it was safe enough to return to her London home. She had been a loveable presence in the cottage and she was greatly missed when she finally left. But life went on as before. My mother continued her work at the farmhouse and to bring home milk, cream, butter and the occasional chicken. I had started to raise rabbits and chickens which I sold or were passed on to our London family.

Finally the war ended and in my ever observant way saw that the spirit of community and togetherness that was an ever present feature of wartime life evaporated almost overnight. Nevertheless there were celebrations and the village had a festival at which my father won a pig or 30 shillings in a bowling competition. He took the money. As it turned out this was his last visit to us. A month later he was posted abroad and we didn't see him again for over two years.

In the spring of 1946 my mother started to think of returning to London and preparing the move: 'I know you have been happy here Raymond but London is our home and we need to get you to a good school and for me

to find a job'. It was decided we would stay until the harvest was finished and another summer enjoyed. And that is exactly what happened. We had glorious weather and witnessed the first signs of the agricultural revolution to come. Mr Carmichael, the farmer bought a combine harvester. The age of the horse and the reaper and binder were almost over.

It was my good fortune to arrive in the countryside when, because of the war and its restrictions, farming had reverted to its mid Victorian methods. The pace had slowed to that of the horse. Life was more relaxed, people walked and talked and provided, as much as they could, for themselves. Our time in this demi-paradise was drawing to a close and we had to say goodbye to our small cottage, the village school, Tommy and Charlie and all our friends. We would take scores of memories with us.

Mr Horley gently eased the removal van away from the cottage and glided slowly down the narrow lane. We passed through the village and overtook the daughter of the milkman on her pony, past the school and on to the road to London. There were no tears or sadness just a feeling of fortune of having survived the war and done so, as it moved towards its conclusion, in such a perfect place. I go back from time to time as if to confirm it wasn't a dream.



Ray Carter (right), brother Ken and their mother at the time they left Manuden 1946. Photograph (c)Ray Carter.