

My Musical Times

Vernon Williams

1920 - 2010



Introduction

My father, Vernon Williams, started to write this memoir in the late 1990s some years after he had retired. We had given him a computer so that he could stay in touch with us by email, and to access the internet. He had developed some years earlier a non Parkinsons tremor in both his arms, thus his progress using the computer and thus progress on this memoir was very slow.

The first half of this memoir deals with his time in Llanhilleth, a small mining town in the South Wales coal fields and how he emerged from there and establish himself with one of the UK's leading Opera companies. The latter half of the memoir covers his later life in the South East of England and Cornwall and would be of little interest to those readers that are interested in life in Wales.

Janet Phillips (nee Williams)

Harrow 2013.

This whole memoir is © Copyright Janet Phillips 2013.

Prologue

Before I start on my activities which make up my life, I would like to produce a short foreword to say that I am no one in particular. I was going to entitle my few words as 'The Diary of a Nobody', but this title has been used before, so I have changed it to 'My Musical Times'. The reason for which, you will find out later.

An autobiography, whether short or long, is normally written by someone of importance. I do not claim to be a person that comes into that category. I have not done anything which would have brought my name into the public eye. I have not earned a decoration, or been mentioned in dispatches, and there are very few people who will know that I ever existed. The chronology of my story may be 'out' by a couple of years either way but that will not make any difference to the truth of it.

I did not know, and never heard anything of, my great grandparents. If this had been possible it would have been very interesting to read, as it would have taken us back in time to the late 18 and early 19 centuries. So what I write is only of the 20th Century. I write it for anyone to read, but particularly for the benefit of my great grandchildren and their descendants, who will not have known or remembered me by the time they reach the age of understanding .If the copy lasts that long...

God Bless You, my darlings...

1. My Early Days

1920 must have been a wonderful year. Many important things happened, no doubt, but the most important thing was that I was born on the 31st of March. This must have put our little coalmining town of Llanhilleth Monmouthshire South Wales on the map.

It was a big event in more ways than one. My mother must have been pleased with the result because I have no brothers or sisters. Either that or she must have thought she had produced a genius and just left it at that. On the other hand, I was such a big baby that my mother probably said “never again”. I think that the latter was the most likely situation, because I was told very much later that I was put aside as having no life, and mother was not doing so well either. But it did not take long before I made them change their minds.

I had arrived and with all my yelling and the other noises that all children make, I doubt whether at that time she realised that she had a musical prodigy in her arms. That may be a little exaggerated, but considering that my father was a fair performer on the violin, I think it was only to be expected that I would have music somewhere in my little mind at that time.

I was born in a house called ‘Brynhyfryd’ on the Commercial Road in the middle of a county called Monmouthshire. A fairly large house which was the house of my father’s parents. My grandfather built it with the help of a few others, and a very nice house it was. It was situated beside the road in the valley which boasted one road, one railway line and one river. One had to climb to get anywhere, except, of course, straight down the valley.



A county which at that time was part of Wales, and I was given to understand that every one hundred years it passed back and fore between England and Wales. This I presume was purely for political and environmental reasons, but now all that has changed. The old county is part of a new county called ‘Gwent’ which I again presume is for the same reasons, but now dominated by Welsh laws. I still consider myself as of Welsh origin although I was never taught the Welsh language. Not even at the school I attended, which was Ty-Graig in Aberbeeg. This I have always regretted as the language would have been very useful to me in later life.

My community was situated in what is called the Western valley in which there are a series of villages like the one I lived in.

These villages sprung up around the coal mines as they were first sunk. The valley stretched from Newport to Aberbeeg where it divided into two valleys. One which ended at Ebbw Vale and the other at Brynmawr. There was a river flowing down the valley called, quite understandably, the river Ebbw. At Aberbeeg, two tributaries join to make one river. One from Ebbw Vale and the other from Brynmawr, the river then emptying into the Bristol Channel.

Crumlin was the next village down the valley from Llanhilleth, and Aberbeeg was the next village up the valley. They were three small communities, not very big even if you put them all together, but it was a pleasant place to live.

I say pleasant because I was lucky enough to be brought up away from the more severe dusty area that was in close proximity of the colliery. There were other little communities up and down the valley, but I had very little to do with them except for Abertillery which was the largest town in striking distance. It was here that we did our shopping and where what little entertainment there was at that time took place.

I suppose the railway was the most important form of transport. There was very little otherwise. Very few people owned cars in those days. I remember that there was just one family in my area that owned a motorcar and that was a car made by the 'Ford' company at a cost of £100 (or £120 for a deluxe model). I cannot remember the name of the model. Buses were in their infancy (where we lived anyway) and could not be depended upon. I remember on one occasion when mother and I were on a bus travelling locally in Abertillery, we came to a steep hill and all the passengers were asked to get off and walk up so that the empty bus would have a better chance of negotiating the hill. This bus was owned by a local person who was a near relative of ours, and he in time turned out to be the owner of quite a large bus company.

Mobility was very limited so Q.E.D. one did not go anywhere, only on special occasions, and they did not come often. My grandfather went to the White City exhibition in London, by train of course. When I heard about it I thought it was in some foreign country. The railways were indeed the only dependable form of transport in those far back days.

If I remember them correctly, there were four companies that run the railway system, and they were The Great Western Railway, the London Midland and Scottish Railway, the London and North Eastern Railway, and the Southern Railway. Our part of the country was served by the Great Western. The engines were driven by steam, with smaller engines pulling the local trains, but the main line trains were pulled by the larger engines. Those routes included the trains from London Paddington to Penzance Cornwall, and the section ending at Haverfordwest or Milford Haven in South Wales.

These trains were pulled by engines of superb quality, beautiful to look at, and of fantastic engineering. I refer of course to the King Class and Castle Class Engines as two of the best. To see these engines moving through the countryside was indeed poetry in motion. Unfortunately these locomotives were discontinued and the diesel



Herbert Frost engine driver [future father-in-law] sat upon train

engines have been used as the substitute. This change to me was unfortunate as these new monsters had no character at all, but I suspect that this change came about in the name of speed and efficiency.

This change of course came much later in time to our valley. Freight was carried on the railway, especially iron ore to the Ebbw Vale steelworks, which

was then a thriving business. People rarely went for holidays. That was a pleasure still to come, and air travel was also yet to come. That, no doubt, was a possibility in one or two minds, but it took some time to come to fruition. That was the time when it was an event to see a single engine plane flying overhead. The people that went abroad for holidays were only the wealthy that could afford it. And the only way to travel was by luxury liner, where one spent weeks on the oceans of the world.

At the time we are speaking of, the British Isles was a large industrial nation, especially in ship building. There was very little money to spare and you will find that I will say this repeatedly, and there was no transport even if people had the money. The railway companies advertised special cheap days out in the summer time so that one could enjoy a day by the seaside. This, for us, was of course a trip to Barry Island which was our nearest seaside resort, and every one normally had a very good time. This meant ice cream and a ride on the carousel. One would then go to the beach, sit on the sand and possibly test the temperature of the water. When I was very young it was suggested that I sit on the sand, but I got very upset at the thought of the sand making my coat dirty, and that of course would upset mother. No doubt I was pacified in the end. One hoped for sunshine but usually it rained.

As a matter of interest, Llanhilleth had the longest railway station platform in the western valley and could take the longest set of coaches without having to 'pull up' twice at that particular platform as they had to do at every other station in the valley. The town was not short of other amenities. There was one cinema named 'The Playhouse'. It was intended to be named 'The Hippodrome'. I never found out the reason why the name was changed. The building was completed in about the year 1910 and became a very popular music hall which attracted many people from all parts of the valleys.

But the 1930's brought with it talking films and the 'Playhouse' became a cinema. This went on for about twenty years within which time I helped serve the public by attending the building in rota system during performances, as I was a member of the St John's Ambulance Brigade. In the 1950's television took over and the attendances at 'The Playhouse' dwindled and its usefulness as a cinema ceased. The mining seams also were doing their work, and the whole building was showing signs of collapse through subsidence, and so too dangerous for public use. It was demolished soon afterwards.

Then there was 'The Park' which was a large piece of grassland where I watched many cricket matches being played. There was a building called 'The Workman's Hall' in which there was a concert hall with a stage, and it was also used as a cinema. I remember going to this building on a Saturday afternoon when I was about the ripe old age of seven to watch a film and the inevitable serial which always ended on a "cliff hanger" that made you attend the following week to see how the hero escaped. The admission fee was the enormous sum of 1 old penny or 1d as it was written.

12 old pennies equalled 5 new pence, so 1d is worth less than half of a new penny. Underneath the cinema/theatre was the snooker and billiard hall, in which I spent quite a few happy hours on the billiard table trying to beat my father at that particular game. I was also given to understand that under the billiard hall there was a swimming pool, but as far as I was concerned I never saw it uncovered. There was also a tennis court, bowling green and a Quoit pitch. If you have not heard of this game it involves players having a number of steel horseshoe shaped rings which one pitched into a square of mud in which was an immovable steel pin. The object of course was to cover that pin.

There were also four or five churches in the area. More people went to church in the 20's and 30's than today.

The other matter of note was the viaduct bridge at Crumlin, which was the next town down the valley. It was an iron girder bridge which carried another railway across the valley. It was very high, being some 200 feet above the valley floor, and was approx. 1,650 feet long. It was considered by the locals as a wonder of the world. Unfortunately it was demolished at the demise of the railways, which happened as far as Passenger Services were concerned in 1962, which is sadly another story. Hurrah for the Great Western Railway.

Abertillery on the other hand was quite a thriving town in the 1920's and 30's. As far as entertainment was concerned there were four large cinemas, and it was in one of these cinema's that I saw my first talking film. I was very young and was scared out of my tiny little mind. It seemed that I was afraid when I heard noises and saw made-up faces. I could not stand seeing and hearing 'Jazz Bands' or see carnivals. I would scream and run away as far as possible. So I think I was a little perturbed as to what I was going to see or hear, but I guess I soon got over it.

I can remember to this day what film I saw and it was 'The Desert Song'. There was also a market hall where concerts were held and also other indoor activities.

The towns shining light though was its sports-ground. It was quite a large arena where football or cricket could be played, or turned into an athletic ground which included a bicycle race track. At that time it was one of the best arenas in South Wales as it had natural seating capacity, being cited with one side of the valley being a natural rising grandstand, and at the other side was the man-made grandstand

The film industry also used Abertillery as the location for one or two films, such as 'The Citadel' which starred Rosalind Russell, in 1938, also 'Arabesque' in 1965. In 1936 the battle scene in the film 'Things to come' was shot at South Griffin Colliery which was a few miles north of Abertillery.



The industry that employed the most men was coal mining and there were a number of 'mines' as they were called in the area. It was called the South Wales Coalfield. The 'mines' had been there for quite a long time. In fact the first shaft was sunk for the Llanhilleth colliery in the year 1870, and the depth of the shaft was 350 metres.

By the time 1920 arrived 1900 men were employed there, my father being one of them. The majority of the coal mined from this colliery at this time was sold to the Egyptian State Railways. But trouble was about to hit the South Wales coal-mining industry. The life blood of the mining families was about to be taken from them. This happened the year after I was born, so I cannot give any first hand information. But during the 1914-18 war, coal was required and lots of it, but when peacetime came things changed. For one thing I presume sales began to tumble and so the owners of the mines started sacking workers, or asking them to take less money in wages. This of course was not acceptable to the miners so they refused to work. In other words they were on strike. This strike was backed by the miners union and lasted for six months, but even with the union behind them the miners lost all they had been striking for. They had to return to work with lower wages than what they had started with. The men returned to work feeling defeated. They had struggled for six months and had lost everything. In the parish area of Abertillery, which included Llanhilleth, there were approx 7000 men working in the pits, and when the men went back to work this number had decreased considerably. So you can see how difficult it was to even exist at that time. The men that returned to work received a cut in wages and received only half the amount than what they received before the strike began, which was approximately £1 pound 10 shilling's (in old coinage). So this was a shattering way of life to finish off the sufferings of an all out strike.

As far as feeding themselves was concerned the adults, with what charity could provide, looked after themselves, but the children were fed in the churches, even if it was only bread and jam. When I came of age, I attended one of these churches which was the Commercial Road Baptist Church. Over a thousand children were helped in this way at that time.

Many men were leaving the valleys (and coal mining) for pastures new such as Birmingham and Coventry, where the industry of motorcar manufacture was taking place. Llanhilleth colliery was closed for producing coal in 1968 and the surface machinery were demolished very shortly afterwards.

2. Family

I had three uncles on my father's side of the family and one aunt. My father's name was Trevor, and he was the youngest of four brothers who were named William, Edgar, and Reginald. And his sister's name was Eva. My grandfather Gomer Williams was a very good man. A good man in every sense of the word, and my grandmother Sarah was a person without a care in the world... 'come day, go day and hope for tomorrow', a wonderful friend and to me a lovely grandmother.



Gomer was a politically staunch Liberal. A follower of the great David Lloyd George. A more honest and upright man than my grandfather one could not find. He was a local counsellor and would help anyone who sought his advice. I was informed that on many occasions he would bring in someone from outside who had no permanent table and say to Sarah his wife 'another chair please' and the stranger would

have a meal with us. And it was known that he would help families with children's clothing when things got desperate.

He was a man I respected in every way. He started work as a coal miner, but for some reason unknown to me he left that and became an agent for the new idea of insuring oneself against death. So he joined the Royal Liver insurance company as an agent in our area. He was a fair gardener also. He had a garden at the rear of the house, and in this garden he erected a greenhouse. He grew a vine in this greenhouse which produced wonderful bunches of grapes. He also grew chrysanthemums, the colour and size I have never seen since. They were absolutely fantastic. Mind you, I was only a little boy, so it could have been that I saw things much larger than the adults did, but every one seemed to admire them.



It was very nice having this garden, but when one considers that the ground was now beginning to rise at the rear of the house and there were about thirty steps to climb before we got to it, we had plenty of exercise. Especially when water was required for the plants. I may be wrong but I do not think hose pipes had been invented at that time.

He was also a very devout Christian, and regularly attended the Baptist Church on Commercial Rd, Llanhilleth. Myself, being one of the local grandchildren, was also made to go regularly to Sunday School. It must have influenced my life as I have been a Christian, or at least tried to be, ever since. No one was allowed to say 'No' to my grandfather. He was quite puritanical in some ways. My father always addressed him as 'Father' when spoken to, but I seemed to break into his armour a little and we got on quite well. I stayed up nights with him come the end and it saddened me when I lost him, as I had lost a dear friend.

Also at this time my father left the mines. This was about 1932 and he took over the insurance job that my grandfather left behind at his death. I remember we were all very sad at the loss of dear grandfather but very pleased and happy to know that my father (or Dad as I used to call him) did not have to go down the mine again. I think that my mother was the most pleased of all. She did not have the problem of dealing with dirty clothes and coal dust anymore, and we lived a better life as a family now that dad was able to be home for longer periods. We started to attend church services regularly now that dad was free on a Sunday. Church attendance was far greater in the 1920's and 30's as shows in that between ten or twelve conformist,



nonconformist churches and chapels were well attended in our two villages of Llanhilleth and Aberbeeg.

This came to the forefront very forcibly when on the Whit Monday every year, the Sunday school

children plus the adults with the church choirs leading each church paraded the streets singing praises to the Lord. I would venture to say that most of the children in the villages attended Sunday School in one church or another, and as far as the children were concerned in the Baptist Church, all noise and chatter came to a sudden halt when Mr John Rowlands walked into the room.

He was the superintendent at the church and also the headmaster of one of the local day schools. So he was one who was to be obeyed.

The elders of my family expected me to become a Baptist minister. This did not happen, but looking back the possibility was there as future events in my life could have predicted. Every Whit Monday I was there following the Baptist Church choir, a row nearer the choir as the years rolled by until eventually there I was in the front row singing my heart out. But I must not overrun myself or I shall get into all sorts of trouble. I am still a very young and impressionable youngster and almost every Sunday in my early childhood I spent with my grandparents, when we all gathered together for a conversational evening after church. There was no television to watch and only one wireless set to listen to, and my grandfather insisted that even that piece of machinery had to be silent on a Sunday, except for the news bulletins. The elders would sit in the kitchen and put the world to rights while my cousins and I would dream dreams and consider our future in the sitting room. My grandmother Sarah was an enigma. As I have said she stumbled through life without a care. She must have been made of stern stuff because she never had a doctor to her in her life. And if it had not been for my aunt Eva who never married and was always at home to keep things going, I do not know where everything would have ended up.

I have always loved to eat sweet things, which is why I guess I have always been a big lad, and I suppose my grandmother encouraged this. I was always asking her for bread pudding. It was delicious, and a tray containing this wonderful mixture was always on the cold slab for me to help myself whenever I came to the house. Oh happy days.

I will now leave my father's family and proceed to my mother's family. I knew very little of my grandfather Henry Parfitt, my mother's father, and all I remember of grand-mother Martha Parfitt was that she was mother to the whole district of Warm Turn Aberbeeg. When anything was wrong the cry went out 'fetch Martha'. From that side of the family I had three uncles and one aunt. Their names were Henry, Edgar and Wilfred and the one sister whose name was Lillian. The other sister was named Irene who therefore turned out to be my mother. We rarely visited my mother's family as it was quite a long walk, there being no transport at all, but that did not mean we never saw them. It was on special occasions like Christmas and the like. We would spend Christmas Day with mother's family, stay the night there, and on Boxing Day go to my father's family and a good time was had by all. It must be remembered that we had to make all our own entertainment, and that was hilarious to say the least. I did not know much about it at the time as this was in my very early days. I remember on one Christmas Day while walking to my mother's family home there was so much snow about, and it was blowing a blizzard. My father put me on his shoulder to carry me as I must have found it too hard to walk as it was all uphill anyway.

In my young days the 1920's and 1930's the weather seemed to coincide with the seasons much more than what they do now. We are in the year 2006 now but then the winters were very cold and we had snow in abundance.

While the summers were sunny and hot, with one's shoe's sticking to the melting tar on the roads. Autumn was a pleasant time with the leaves changing colour, making the most beautiful scenes one could wish for. Spring brought the beginning of new life. To see the trees budding into new leaves and the seeds we had sown, showing above the soil in anticipation of the scented flowers that would soon appear. But we had time to stand and stare, not like today. Now it is one mad rush to get everything done.

So my mother's parents do not seem to figure in my life at all. I do not remember anything of the first light of day where I was born because it was not long before we moved up the hill, as it were, to a place of our own which was only right and proper, to a small district called Brynithel. It was there that I spent my childhood and my informative years. The place was pleasant enough and I spent a reasonably happy childhood. As I have already said my father was a miner and we were surrounded by coalmines, so obviously one of the biggest problems for the women folk was to keep homes clean, coal dust being everywhere. Life was very hard and so it must have been for my parents. Work was scant and what work there was, was very physical and soul destroying. Most of us were very poor but thinking back we appeared to be quite happy.

3. Life in Llanhilleth

We grew our own vegetables and if I remember correctly Dads speciality were Swede's. We also had an allotment like most other families where we grew our Runner Beans, Peas, Cabbages etc, so really we were quite self-supporting in vegetables anyway. The only employer of any note was the local coal mine at Llanhilleth (as I have already explained) which was owned by a company named Partridge and Jones and most of the men-folk were employed there. I say local because there were many collieries in the area, but travelling was a big drawback. So therefore my father worked in the Llanhilleth colliery. My mother like all the women folk looked after the home praying that their husbands, sons and boyfriends would return home unharmed as accidents happened all too often. Memories of me sitting or leaning against my mother's knee (so I am told) come to my mind quite often, while she sat looking out of the window awaiting my father's return from his work. Teaching me the Lord's Prayer while waiting, and the relief in her voice and the look on her face told its own story when he came into view. The men worked long hours for very little pay, which was the outcome of the 1921 strike which I have already mentioned, so the women had a very hard job 'to make things meet' as we used to say. I think at this point I will remind you of a little poem written by a local resident of Llanhilleth whose name was Cheryl Tanner and it went something like this:

We talk about our mountains, Cheryl Tanner, Llanhilleth

*We talk about our vales,
but seldom do we mention
the miners of South Wales.
Each day their lives in peril,
with danger lurking round,
but what a wage they are getting,
for toiling underground.
They ask for increased wages,
the owners, they say no,
they say the pit's not paying,
that's bunkum, we all know.
Now you the general public
just listen to our plea,
so rise and help the miner,
as he'd help you and me.
As you sit by your fireside
just think of what it costs,
maybe for that coal you're burning
a miners life was lost.*

Things started going from bad to worse and in 1926 the coal industry suffered another strike from which it never really recovered. Normally the sons of miners took on the same work as their fathers, but by now sons and indeed daughters were moving out of the district to find pastures new. We lived in a period where husbands went out to work and wives stayed home to look after the family. I think it was a fact that if a lady was working and then married, she would perforce give up her job for a man to take over. She was only allowed to do menial jobs like being a servant to the aristocracy. This all changed of course during the 1939-45 war. That is when all hands were needed to save the country. Food and clothing was very basic, holidays away from home were almost unheard of but we survived. On the other hand we at that time did not know any better. There were no pithead baths to help the men to bathe themselves to get rid of the dust and dirt after working eight or more hours underground. Those came quite some time later, but I have seen my father bathe himself in a tin bath in front of a coal fire in the kitchen many times. He walked to work every day, as no transport was laid on and it must have taken him half to three quarters of an hour to get to the colliery.

Internal bathrooms and toilets were as yet not thought of, not for ordinary dwellings anyway. In most cases the toilet was at the bottom of the garden, so if it was raining one certainly got very wet, but we were lucky. In our case the toilet was attached to the rear of the house. Electricity was quite a modern invention, and as far as labour-saving devices were concerned there were none. No electric washing machines, no refrigerators, no electric cookers, no telephones or TV, and above all no central heating. If we wanted to bathe, saucepans of water had to be boiled on the open fire to fill the bath, and that fire was kept alight by serving it with coal. There was an oven built into the unit next to the fire in which my mother would cook the meat and any puddings that we had for our meals. Coal was delivered to us, a ton at a time, outside the house and then it was half a day's work to store it in its rightful place at the back of the house.

This had to be paid for even though my father worked in the mine, but I think the price was at a reduced rate. If I remember correctly the price was ten shillings and six pence a ton. We had electric lighting in the downstairs rooms but not in the upstairs bedrooms, so if one wanted light to go to bed one used a candle or an oil lamp.

My father's job in the mine was a Splicer. That meant he mended the ropes when they broke. These ropes were mechanically driven to carry the coal from 'the face' or 'the heading' (that was the name given to the place where the coal was cut) to the bottom of the mine in 'trams' (that is what the containers were called). The coal was then lifted to the surface in the cage powered by the main engine in the large engine room on the surface. Horses were also used underground to do the same job in places where engine power was not available. For what I understand about ropes, they were made of hemp and wire.

I heard my father say that when he had 'married' or mended a rope it would never again break in that place. I suppose that was the trademark of a good splicer.

4. Childhood

I am now getting older and beginning to think for myself. I think I realise why I have no kith or kin. It must have been hard enough bringing me up in the way I should go, without piling on the agony of clothing and feeding further increases to the family. Work was poorly paid and very uncertain. Money was very scarce, so that meant I



had no pocket money as such. We did not go short in our meals, mother saw to that even if she went without herself. I remember that I was given pancakes and doughnuts. No wonder I was fat and doughnuts are my favourite cakes even to this day. As I say we had no money to buy toys and such like, but we had our happy times. If we kids wanted to play rugby we made a ball out of paper tied up with string, because our game in Wales has always been rugby. Then another game was called Bat and Catty. That was when one put a short piece of wood pointed at both ends on to the floor. Then one took a longer piece of wood, twirled the short piece into the air and hit it as far as possible. This game lasted as long as one wanted to continue. As traffic was almost non-existent we could play in the

street to our hearts content. One such street game was skipping. When a greengrocer had oranges delivered they would come in a box tied up with rope, the box being more long than square. This rope was called an orange rope. Talk nicely to the greengrocer and he would give you a rope or two, and according to the length of each piece of rope, you tied two pieces together and made a long rope to be used for the whole width of the road with a dozen or more kids joining in. It was all great fun.

Another piece of equipment we played with was ready for use after a visit to the local blacksmith, who after a little persuasion would make us a wheel out of very thin metal. We would bowl this down the street with the aid of a piece of metal with a loop on it so that we would run with or after it as the mood took us. It was a very useless occupation but it helped to while away the time in school holidays, etc and it gave us a little exercise in the process.

There were bad times and there were good times. We lived in the country where one could walk unmolested. Our parents had no fear of we kids coming to any harm. We had plenty of green fields to play in, and such things as cars and buses were almost non-existent. I also remember that there was no fear of being knocked down and where vandalism was unheard of. We kids were not angels, we had our fun but we knew when to stop.

Our parents were a little severe and we knew what we would get if we overstepped the mark. I remember that there was a lady in our street who did what I thought was the football pools. She called to me one day and asked me if I would run to the post office and purchase for her a postal order. I said I would, but considering that the post office was down on the floor of the valley, running was out of the question as I had to climb up again. This must have taken me half an hour at least to complete. When I gave her the postal order she put it in an envelope and said now would you go again and post it for me. I had to do the same thing over again. For doing that I was given 3d. I was a rich boy. No doubt I spent that 3d in quick time.

There was a sweet shop opposite where I lived, in a house just like mine. The family that lived there were I think the obvious owners of the shop, and they used the front room as the shop. The front room window had instead of curtains a display shelf on which were different sweetmeats. We would sit on the windowsill on a winters evening choosing sweets that we would buy if we had the money, but we never did because we never had any money. I remember that one could buy two ounces of Sharpe's toffees for 1d or a bar of Cadbury chocolate, the only bar available then for 2d. One bit of mischief we did would be to tie a length of string to a door knocker and so bring the occupant to the door, which on most occasions would be a wasted journey for them. The occupant soon found out what was happening but did nothing about it. This was all good natured. We had our fun and the adults did not seem to get too upset.

The doors of houses were never locked. I have wondered since whether that was because there was nothing to steal or that my generation were better behaved. That is why there were no muggings, and as I have said one could walk even in the darkness without any fear of being attacked. There was a certain amount of wickedness in all of us and it was a favourite pastime for us when on occasions we would raid one of the local allotments and pinch a few potatoes. Then we would go to our local play area, which I must say was quite a large area, make a fire and roast these potatoes. We enjoyed such antics, but never did any damage to crops or property.

The whole expanse of the mountainside behind the houses was there for us to explore if we so desired. The country was there for all to enjoy, for we kids who would slide down the gentle slopes wearing holes in our trousers, and getting thumped for our trouble. Many times we would at harvest time take a container and go around the hedgerows picking blackberries, or into the fields which had the blueberry plants and pick to our hearts content taking them home. Mother would make very tasty pies with these delicious fruits which was God's gift to us. And there were also the adults who were out of work or on strike who would sit in their favourite spot and ponder on the important issues that had or would influence their lives. Some would ramble through the leafy lanes and others would climb to the top of the mountain to commune with nature, listen to the skylark, and hear how noisy silence can be.

From there one could see the hills folding into one another forming the valleys and you felt as if you were on top of the world. Farmhouses could be seen here and there, and cattle and sheep could also be seen feeding peacefully in the fields. This was when nature was most generous. At other times she was most spiteful.

A thunder storm viewed from those heights could be awe inspiring, and a snowstorm sent you for cover in quick time. But I loved the country and I still do. This is as I saw my part of the country where I spent my youth.

5. Education

This is going to be the start of a new adventure. What is school? It is a place where you learn things. What an idea. I did not like school and I cannot say that I ever did come to like schooling. Teachers were not very good, but it kept us kids off the road. We did learn the three 'R's which were as you know reading, writing and arithmetic. If one was lucky with an obvious desire to learn, one or two special subjects became available such as art and music. This was available after you came out of primary school. It was apparently in my first period of time at school that it was diagnosed that I had bad eyesight, and when I say bad I mean bad. It was found out that I had virtually no sight in my left eye and only partial vision in my right. Spectacles rectified the right eye, but nothing could be done with the left and it has been like that all my life. I am in and out of the opticians but praise be I am not blind. They say when you lose one sense you gain or perfect another. This must have been good for me in a way that made my hearing and memorising what I heard much more acute, especially where music was concerned.



This now caused me great concern. By wearing spectacles I was not able to enter into any of the physical games such as rugby. This game I enjoyed very much as a youngster, because Wales had a very good team at that time and I was at a very impressionable age. I was very proud at being a Welshman, and be that as it may I still am very patriotic. I have already said that the teachers we had to put up with were no good at their chosen profession, and were certainly no good as gentlemen. The lady teachers were in general very nice, but the men teachers were a lot to be desired. After holidays and weekends I worried myself silly thinking about having to go back to school to be spoken to in a very unkind way by these so called teachers. I remember very well a teacher telling me when I was swatting up for the entrance examination to the grammar school, that I had as much

chance of passing the exam as a snowball had of existing in a fire. What a way to encourage youngsters to learn. Yet we now hear of youngsters leaving school in the year 2000 who are without the ability to read or write.

All this was happening while I was still in primary school, and not only the teachers but my own playmates would do their share of bullying. I had become a prize target in this respect as I was a very fat youngster and I also wore glasses. A classic example. I passed the exam although I was a long way down the list. But I had achieved something. I had passed the first rung of the ladder but there would be a great deal of work to be done in the time that lay ahead. I had an accident at about this time. I tried to move a gate with my knee, I came in contact with the iron latch and it did not work when leaving the house. The gate in question was at my friend's house and had three steps before opening it. Of course I always jumped these three steps when leaving the house but this time someone had left the gate half open or half shut whichever way one looked at it. The damage was not a pretty site and it took fourteen precious weeks out of my young life before it healed and I have carried the scar ever since. It was in that time of fourteen weeks that I seemed to grow up. I was somebody. I was beginning to think for myself. I was now at the age of eleven a scholar at the grammar school and I was very proud of this achievement. The bullying still continued at this school. Such an incident could and did occur. We were in the gym and we had to climb the rope to the ceiling and obviously slide down again, but of course I was left standing. I could not even start to climb as I was too heavy for my young muscles. The comment of the teacher was 'Williams wins, he was up and down before you lot had started'. I lived through that and much more before I learned how to handle it, but handle it I did.

I learned more than the three 'R's at that school, but school life was not to last very long. This defective vision that I was plagued with caught up with me and I spent a modest three years at the grammar school before my parents were advised that I should give up studying, as far as education was concerned, or else I would lose my sight altogether. University was out of the question and so I had to consider what I was going to do with my life. This was going to be a very difficult problem. Youngsters when they left school either followed in their father's profession or left the area entirely to search for utopia, where it was said that the streets were paved with gold.

6. My Early Career

At this time many young people were leaving the Welsh valleys for fresh fields to try and find employment. I thought that I would follow the normal procedure and went to the job exchange to see what was on-going, because I flatly refused to go into that death trap called a coal mine. As it were to prove a point, I had never before nor have I since been down a coal mine or any other mine. There was nothing as I expected in my area and the only thing on offer was a job learning dairy work in a place called Welwyn Garden City. A place at that time which I had never heard of, and a very long way from my home town.

To cut a long story short, I took the job, but how I managed to get to that town I will never know. When I arrived at my place to start work I found that the job was only a milk salesman. The job was of no use to me but I got on very well with the horse. Yes, believe it or not, I with another gentleman delivered milk by horse and cart. We had to fill the milk bottles before we started and that took some time. So we had to be up very early in the morning. The dairy was some way away from my lodging and I had to traverse through fields to get there. So if it was raining, I was very wet before I had even started work. I could have had a milk salesman's job at home. I was not satisfied with this so I went to the job centre there to ask for something better.

Again I was offered a worthless job in what was called Welwyn Garden City 1929 stores. Again I took the job not knowing any better I presume, thinking I would elevate myself to managing director in the matter of a few years. My age was against me I thought. I found again that I had achieved the depth of despair when the most educated part of my work was stacking shelves and sweeping floors. I still had not found the streets that were paved with gold. I took another leap into the unknown. Again I went to the job centre to try yet again to make my fortune.

This time I fared a little better. I was told there was nothing better where I was living at the time but I would fare better if I went to London. I was getting used to this sort of thing now so I agreed to give it a try. I felt like Dick Whittington. Everyone will know that story. Again I was traveling into the unknown. I must have been a most determined kid to be traveling all these distances being so young. On arrival at the job centre they gave me a job with a car sales people called Jimmy James on the Euston Rd in London. I felt a little more confident about taking this job, as dealing with cars would be the in thing and being a car mechanic would be quite a good means to an end. They also fixed me up with lodgings in a hostel just off the Bayswater Rd. Not like home but better than nothing.

7. Early Musical Experience

These events took place in 1936 when I would have been sixteen as I remember being in the crowd that viewed the funeral of George V. A group of we boys at the hostel had been invited to attend this event in the grounds of a government building which was on the route, and we were able to see over the heads of the people on the pavement.

This part of my life was progressing reasonably well until a visit from my parents. When they saw how I was living and what I was doing with this life of mine they went berserk and made me pack my bags. I was away home with them on their return trip. The old fable did not work for me. I did not find any gold but the experience was very valuable.

I remember that about this time we went on holiday to Weston Super Mare. I cannot remember a great deal about it, but it cost my parents 15 shillings for our board and lodge, and as a treat I had a bar of chocolate every day which cost 2d a bar. I can still remember that the bar was named the Mars bar. I think it was the first wrapped bar to be produced. The next thing was a big question mark. What was I going to do with my life. There was no other way that I could think of but to stay on to assist my father in his newly acquired job as an insurance salesman, having been handed down the job from his father who had built the business in the area when the idea of insurance first emerged on the scene. My father must have left his work at the mine gladly, because he would now be free of the danger and the uncertainty of coal mining in our area. I was now at home for good or so I thought.

Academically I was an also ran, but I had a great interest in art, music and singing. While at school I was in the school choir and I was also ribbed and called the art teacher's pet, but I guess it was my father who led me into my greatest interest of all... Music. He was most proficient in playing the violin. There were very few orchestras about in the twenties so he must have thought 'I will teach my son'. He must have done this with much dedication because I am told when I was six years old I played my first violin solo in public. This was at an anniversary service in the local Baptist Church, the church I was to become a member of in my teens.

Music must have been in my blood. How it got there I fail to see because Sir Arthur Sullivan's music was the dominant factor in our household. Not that I have anything against Sullivan's music, he wrote some lovely music. Music which brought magic into sound, but the Gilbert and Sullivan operas took pride of place if any music was heard at all other than Handel's Messiah. I did not come into contact with the romantic composers like Beethoven, Mozart, Verdi and all the others, far too many of them to be mentioned here.

I say that kindly because even the wireless was in its infancy and the sound of a large symphony orchestra had yet to enter into my sensitive feelings. We had to do a lot to entertain ourselves. We had in our area at that time a get together called a "Go as you please concert" This entertainment was very popular for some time, and I remember when I was quite young that my father entered us in this go as you please concert playing a duet on our violins.

We had a great friend of ours playing the piano as the accompaniment. This was when I was about ten or eleven. We won first prize. What the prize was I have no idea, but it was given to us in a sachet with glass beads to hang around ones neck. What happened to it I do not know. I even remember what we played. It was a rendering of the first and second violin parts of the overture to "The Calif of Bagdad" This was success indeed.

I can just remember Dad and I making or building our first radio receiver. They were not on the market for sale, not in our little backwater anyway. In those days when one asked the grocer (who incidentally owned his own grocery shop not like these superstores of today) for a pound of butter, he would cut it from a huge block of butter which had been delivered to him in a somewhat large box made of wood. A little smaller at the bottom so that the butter slid out easier. We managed to procure one of these boxes and with a few deft movements of a hand saw, cut it to the shape we required. We put some other material on the top of the box and onto this was attached some electric bulbs which were called valves. Also on the top was placed a contraption which was a wheel on a rod which was attached to two pieces of cardboard around which had been wound yards and yards of wire (homemade of course). A wire was then put through the window frame to be attached to another wire which ended up attached to an iron pole at the bottom of the garden which was about 20 feet up in the air (the wire I mean not the pole). This was called an aerial. And it was called a wireless. Why a wire—less I still fail to see. An electric current was then put through this contraption and noises came from a box, which meant nothing to me, called a loudspeaker or a cup that you put to your ear called ear phones. After much twiddling with the knobs we did get someone talking, which in those days sounded like magic. In time the Radio as it was called developed into the wireless set, and one could buy a receiver from the electrical shop, properly factory made and no respectable family was without one.

See how things have developed. In today's world nothing is impossible. I was still very young, but I remember the children's hour and in this programme were birthday greetings. I am told that my name was mentioned as having a birthday on the 31st, but most of all I remember Derek McCullough, who was a member of the artist's producing the show. When a birthday for a set of twins came on he would say "HELLO TWINS" in that lovely voice of his. I was also introduced to my first piece of classical music although I did not know it at the time.

The piece was from Gustav Holst's planet suite called Mars, and the name of the programme that it introduced was indeed "The man from Mars". Time went by and I diligently spent many hours in practice to get my performance on the violin better and better.

From a very early age music has been the love of my life, and I have been able to memorise very quickly music that I hear and the music that I read. Later on I had a couple of friends who were of the same mind as me. They were brother and sister. The sister played the piano very well, and the brother also played the violin, but in performance he left me way behind. We had many hours of delightful music. Music became such a passion with me that the violin was always to be found on the middle room table, so that it was always convenient for me to pick up and play with the orchestras as they were broadcast on the radio.

I never did take up the study of music from a theoretical point of view, perhaps I should have if I had realised then how far this music was going to take me. Life went on much as usual. I was growing up very quickly. I was a member of the local Baptist Church, had been since Sunday School days, and an ardent Christian Endeavour worker. Singing in the Church choir was another of my pastimes, and I was also a Sunday school teacher. It was about this time that my parents and I dedicated our lives in the service of Jesus Christ by being baptized together. I also organised bus trips in the summer time for all we young people. It happened on one of these trips that I met my Waterloo.

8. Winifred

She was and still is the most beautiful girl I have ever met, and so begins the life I was destined to lead. And none of it would have been possible without this beautiful girl I met on a bus, and the wonderful parents that brought me into this world and taught me right from wrong.

I met this lovely young lady in about 1937, and yet I had known her since we were kids, although I did not realise this at the time. She had also spent her childhood in the same street as I did.

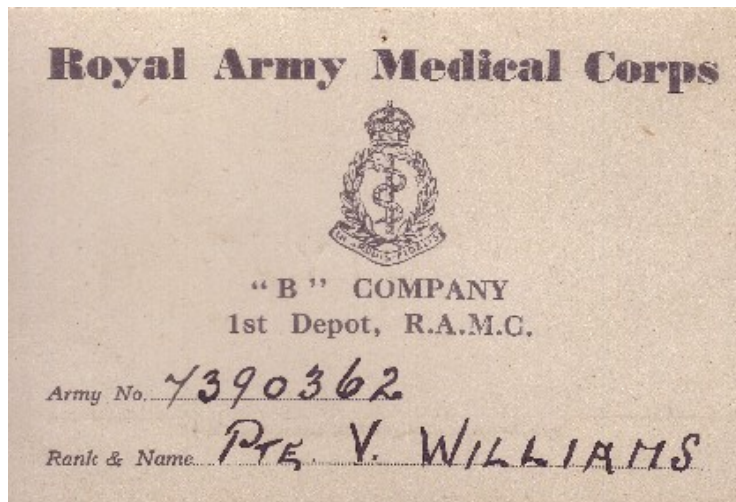


Our friendship developed as you might guess but when she came of age she left home like I did and we lost sight of each other for some time. She went to work in a hospital in Bristol as I understood later, but I could not get her out of my mind, not that I wanted to. I found out her address (her sister Lillian told me) and wrote to her asking her if she felt the same way as I did. I had fallen madly in love with her. She wrote back to say that she felt the same way and she was returning home so that we would be able to see each other. What reason she gave her parents for so doing I never found out, but it caused a little rift regarding parents at the time.

I thought it best to leave well alone and everything sorted itself out. We all went along famously except for a few lectures from her father who was a very good father to his children as my father was to me. I had great respect for both. My dear Winifred, for that was her name, was a very good pianist so with me doing quite well on the violin we had many pleasing times making music. Other times were spent roaming the countryside whispering sweet nothings to each other and increasing the love we had for each other. We were really very happy, but I had to get her home before 9.30pm every time I took her out. Ask young people to be home by that time today and they will definitely disagree. This way of life kept on for quite some time and my voice began to develop. So as well as playing duets with the instruments, I started singing solos with my now serious girlfriend as my accompanist.

My voice had developed into a fair bass-baritone timbre and I was beginning to enjoy life completely. We went to a local concert and we enjoyed it very much as far as I remember. There was a bass soloist singing his part in what I think was an oratorio if my memory serves me right, and after the performance Winifred said to me that she thought I was able to sing as good as he did, so I took this rather seriously. Sometime later I made the decision to have my voice trained on Winifred's

suggestion. I forget how I got in contact with her but a lady by the name of Dorothy Davies came into my life and she had been a member of the BBC singers. How it all worked out is in the mist of time but I eventually took lessons with her and she made a great difference to my voice. My lessons and practice was nearly always with Handels Messiah in the foreground. She used to tell me 'if you can sing the music from the Messiah you will be able to sing anything'. I am now quite convinced she was right. She taught me how to breath properly which is the basis of good voice production.



Progress gathered momentum but unfortunately the Second World War started which did not help at all. This of course was in 1939 and I was called to the colours. I was lucky enough to be posted to the Royal Army Medical Corps as I was already a member of St Johns Ambulance and this of course was an advantage to me, knowing quite a bit of pre-

medical work from the St Johns instruction book. Even today I shudder to think how the medics managed while in action, because we were only given twelve weeks training and the amount of knowledge that each acquired in that time was negligible.

I was sent to hospital for an operation which for me was unfortunate. After I recovered sufficiently I was sent to a nursing home and whilst there I offered my services. Because I had already been told that I was to be discharged because of my very bad eyesight, I was refused because I did not hold the Red Cross certificate. Who knows what my life would have been like if I had stayed in the nursing home. When I arrived home I found that everyone was now doing their little bit for the war effort.

So I did a little job on the weekends as a bus conductor for a local bus company called Jones's buses based at Warm Turn, while Winifred worked on the railway as a porter guard, and incidentally she was the first female porter guard to be appointed in the western region and the second in the whole country. That was quite something to be proud of but there is no documentation to prove it.

This of course at that time was a wartime effort. I do not think that any ladies had worked on the railway system previously. I also had another job in serving my country. I was a member of the ambulance team that served our village and that meant we were on 'call out' twenty four hours a day. I have already told you that I was working with my father.

The manager got me to do the job of the clerk in the office at Abertillery, so I had enough on my plate around that time. Many times I fell asleep at my desk through lack of sleep.

One Saturday afternoon in my job as the 'bus conductor', we were travelling from Cwm to Aberbeeg when I felt quite a bump. I looked out of the rear window to see one of our rear wheels careering down the road behind us, veering to the right and disappearing down onto the railway line after knocking down about half a dozen concrete posts on its travels. The bus on the other hand continued its way on the road thanks to the driver, but it did not do the rear of the bus much good. If it had been the other wheel that had come off I doubt very much if I would have been still around to tell this tale. What happened to the passengers I fail to remember.

Other stupid things occurred which could have been very disastrous. The last bus on a Saturday night, everybody wanting to get home and pile in they did. No lights had to be showing which made it all the more difficult. I had on more than one occasion almost double the allotted number of passengers that I was legally allowed to carry, with me, hanging on grimly to the rails of the exit door. Coming down that hill from Cwm under those conditions was no joke.

9. Marriage

Another very happy momentous event happened. I married that lovely girl I met on the bus. What a lucky chap I was, and that was believe me an understatement. This happened in 1942. We were very much in love and were married in Christ Church Aberbeeg and had the reception at the Bush Hotel in Abertillery. What happened at that reception I do not remember but I have to thank both parents for what they did to arrange it.

At this point in my writing I would like to include a little note from a little tattered piece of paper that I found in one of my books concerning this church. It states LLANHILLETH PARISH MAGAZINE, September 1918 Harvest Thanksgiving Services. An apt sermon poetically expressed. The Rector received a postcard on Monday, July 22nd containing these following beautiful words which were suggested by the sight of Christ Church whilst the writer was sitting in the train at Aberbeeg station. Entitled:

THE CHURCH ON THE HILL

*A Church doth yonder stand---a holy sign,
A silent call to worship and to prayer,
That one may to the ways of God incline,
Amid the toils of this sad world of care,
Where one may in sweet fellowship divine,
Approach the Throne, and there his Maker meet,
Attend all ye who weep and fret and pine,
Ascend the hill to yonder mercy seat,
In prayer your woes forget and solace find,
The valley leave and all its sorrows drear,
Upon the hill refresh your heart and mind,
And there a voice Divine you'll sweetly hear,
If you from sin and sorrow would be free,
Your climb must ever upward, heavenward be.*

My darling looked radiant at the wedding and of course I was on 'cloud nine' myself. I was the happiest guy in the world. As clothing was only obtainable with coupons, it was not a 'white wedding' as my bride was only able to get a new coat which was blue and a skull hat of the same colour. I had to wear my 'best suit' which I had for Sundays and special occasions. Neither of us had a penny to our name, and photographers did not exist, so we have no record of our wedding at all, but we were ecstatically happy.

The one and only incident that I do remember as we were being driven away from the church was of the long standing custom of being stopped on the hill by children who held a rope across the road, laughing and shouting for the happy couple to throw out of the car some coppers (money) for them to pick up and so let the car pass. Someone had remembered to give me some coins before we left.



The Church itself was erected in the year 1910 at a cost of £6,000 and it was built in the style of the 14th Century. I wonder how much that would be on today's valuation. As a matter of interest I would like to inform my readers that about this time it was decided to build a cottage hospital to serve the heads of the valleys

because the nearest hospital was the Royal Gwent which was cited at Newport and that was some way away. As it happened the new hospital was built next door to the lovely church I have been talking about in the year 1922 (I do not think there was any ulterior motive). As far as the staff were concerned I managed to find out a few details about them. All staff lived in. They started work at 6.30am through until 9pm with a 3 hour break. The domestics were paid 7 shillings and six pence per week and the nurses 2 pounds a month. They all were allowed one day a month off (if they kept friends with the matron).

10. Married Life

The weather on the best day of our lives was not in our favour as it rained all day. There was no honeymoon either. We were both at work the next day. As we had no house to move into there had been much discussion by the parents as to which set of parents we would be living with. Winifred's parents won. We had one room up and one room down which was the usual way to sort things out in those far off days. And we had Lillian and Dorothy, Win's younger sisters to think of also but we managed very well.

This is where I thought we were going to spend the rest of our lives. It also became a nagging thought that we could not spend much time living with the in-laws. After a little while a house became available for us in Abertillery to buy. I approached my father about it. The cost of the house was £250 and my father advised me against it as he thought it was far too expensive. Take note of prices today, how things have changed. I thought that by moving into a house of our own we would be able to settle down. If this had happened this little story would never have been written and all of our lives would have been completely different.

The next big event was the arrival of our first daughter who we named Janet. She was a lovely baby and when I first saw her in hospital I nicknamed her strawberry because her nose was covered with freckles. But the name did not stick as the freckles soon vanished. There was another thing about this pedantic new daughter of ours. She knew what she wanted and did her best to get it. (She is still the same).



One example of this came to light soon after she was born. She might not have known it at the time but she would not sleep in a cot. We tried all ways to overcome it but no, it was impossible. Put her in our bed and she was asleep in no time.

On a Thursday we would walk with our friend Freda Howell and her boy Billy to Abertillery where we would have a meal in what the army would call a 'field kitchen'. This was held in a local hall provided by the government and local council at a very nominal price because the war had been going on for about three to four years and the country was getting short of food. Our friendship with Freda started when she lost her lodgings and she had nowhere to stay, so Winifred's father said she must stay with us. He was like that, generous to a fault. How we all fitted in I cannot remember, but fit in we did.

We were very happy but my dear wife suffered a great deal over the birth of our lovely daughter which made me very sad but she was progressing albeit very slowly.

11. My Audition

I continued with my singing lessons with the same lady, progressing very satisfactorily until one day she said to me "Why not try to get a job singing with the Sadler's Wells Opera Company?". You can imagine that I was completely taken by surprise. One can see how this must have been a bit of a shock. I was having my voice trained for amusement only. My thoughts about singing had only got as far as singing in church and doing local concert work, purely for the pleasure of it. But this suggestion had come from a lady of distinction in the musical world. But the thought of me, a local nobody, should try for a position in one of the only two opera companies in the country (the other one of course being Covent Garden) seemed reaching for the moon. And performing in the capital of the country at that. No I thought, I must be dreaming. Of course the practical one, Winifred, thought that the idea was good and would be best if I went for it and to give it a try. If it failed I could always return home and start again.

My parents were not so keen when we told them our decision which was understandable. My mother was going to lose, for the time being anyway, her one and only son, while my father-in-law thought it was a wonderful idea. To be able to leave the depressed area in which we lived and hoping to go into something which would give us a much better life. Terrific! So with all deliberations over, Win and I decided that I should have a go and try my voice in this musical world.

I wrote to the company and asked for an audition. I thought that that would be the last I would hear of my efforts, but no. I heard from them thanking me for my letter and saying that the company were on tour. Their nearest place on their tour list to me would be Bristol, and if this would be convenient for me they would be pleased to hear me sing on such and such a date. They addressed the letter to a Mr Vaughan Williams. The only Vaughan Williams we knew was the composer. We thought this was a good omen. Bristol actually was a very good place for us to go. Win's relatives lived there so as the day approached we made arrangements for us to stay with one of the family and make a bit of a break of it at the same time.

The war was still going strong, so it was not all that could be desired. Bristol was one of Hitler's targets and indeed while we were there a raid did occur but we survived that one. The audition day approached and we had to meet the company at the Hippodrome, at which I approached with fear and trembling. A complete bag of nerves.

Knowing nothing about the workings of theatre life, we were at a loss to know what to do next. We entered the stage door, nobody about, so we started looking for someone. Eventually we found a gentleman who seemed to be very confused.

I obviously told him I was there for an audition, but he seemed very vague about what was going on and said that he thought there were no auditions that day. But that if I waited a little while he would make sure about it. This did not do the nerves any good. He came back eventually and told us that the audition was on but they could not find a pianist. I thought, nice kettle of fish no pianist, but on the other hand a pianist I had never had to play for me before would not be much good, unless he or she would follow me easily. (Here was I criticising a professional pianist before I had started). He asked me who my usual pianist was, and of course I said that it was my wife and there she was standing by my side. The gentleman said fine, and to my wife he said, 'come with me'.

She disappeared and the next thing I knew she was sitting at the piano in the orchestra pit. I thought that this was very unusual but we knew each others way so we got on with it. This was to be the first time for me to stand on a theatrical stage and also singing in an empty theatre. Who I sung to I have not the faintest idea but after a little while he came back and said o.k. (or words to that effect), but would I sing again as Miss Joan Cross would like to hear me. Of course I said 'fine I will sing again'. Later I found out that Miss Cross was the administrator of the company and also one of the principal sopranos. I was there on stage awaiting the go ahead (and Winifred who must have been getting more nervous by the minute) when the door to the auditorium opened and about a dozen or more people came in and sat down. Some opened newspapers and began reading, while one or two appeared to be settling down for a snooze. I thought this rather odd but eventually we were given the all clear to perform.

After I had finished my efforts I was asked to wait a few moments as Miss Cross would like to talk with me. She came on stage and after the normal pleasantries she said, 'I like your voice very much, and we would like you to join the company'. That conversation with her shook me rigid. Me, a small town lad from South Wales to join such a class company as Sadlers Wells Opera was far beyond my imagination. A boy from the welsh valleys to perform in the big city of London was fame indeed. Little did I know then how many Welsh men I was to meet in the profession. Miss Cross, Win and I had quite a chat. She was a very nice lady and we ended our conversation by saying that after going home and arranging for the disposal of my insurance business, I could then consider when I would join the company at a date to be arranged later. Winifred was very happy at my success and we departed home with many thoughts in our mind. To join or not to join, that was the question. Whether to stay in Wales and follow the crowd or to strike out and try to find Utopia. This then was the beginning of the big adventure. This was something new. This was something that only dreams were made of.

There were many pitfalls that had to be considered but most of all it would mean leaving my now dear wife behind at our then home and venture out into the wide world to make my name.

Fortunately Winifred supported me in the venture although she had Janet to care for. There was very little work to be had in South Wales at that time, the war was still on and the prospects of a good life were very bleak indeed.

So we came to the decision that I was all for the music and that there were so few opportunities for advancement in Wales that we should take up the challenge and accept what had been offered to me. It was going to be tough but together we could win through. Correspondence continued between the company and me after agreeing that Winifred would carry on my insurance work when I left. I agreed to join them. I was all prepared to leave on the biggest adventure of my life so far. The last letter I had from the company instructed me to join them at Bournemouth on a certain date, which date after so long evades me but my wife informs me it was in February 1945.



How I got there I cannot remember, but it must have been cold as everyone seemed to be wearing overcoats. My feelings about respectability must have been very limited in those days, because me in my reverent feeling for such a lofty job as a professional opera singer demanded that I wear my 'Sunday best and a black tie'. How wrong I was. One of the first comments I got from my 'instructor' was had I lost a relative, I said 'no'. In that case he said 'Take off that black tie'. After that introduction I was set at ease and was made to feel as I was one of the boys.

Where I lodged when I got there is a complete mystery. I have a feeling it was in the Fisherman's Walk area, but I must have arranged all this before I started out. Of course I knew no one so introductions came fast and furious, and the powers that be did not intend me to hang about. I was on stage the first evening I arrived. I remember quite well what opera it was as it stands out most vividly in my mind. It was La Boheme composed by Puccini. I was made up, given a costume to wear and a fellow actor to lead me about. This surprised me, but in a matter of hours I had become a member of the acting profession. I was now a performing member of Sadler's Wells Opera Company. I was beginning to realize what good music sounded like in its true setting. We continued with the tour and for quite some time I was like a fish out of water, having to find lodgings in each town or city we visited and also the lonely feeling of leaving my family behind at home. I was very depressed and knew I had to come to terms with my loneliness.

I looked forward to the end of the tour so that I could see my loved ones again, but I concentrated on the music and became engrossed with every performance as I was with rehearsals also.

The company were rehearsing a new opera by the composer Benjamin Britten. The name of this new opera was Peter Grimes and at the time I was given to understand that there was a little conflict between Sadlers Wells and Covent Garden as to who was to perform his new opera, and as we now know The Wells won. I was very pleased about that because that meant that I had the enormous privilege of performing in the world premier of this opera which occurred on the 7th June 1945 in the Sadlers Wells Theatre Islington London. So I think I progressed very quickly learning the chorus parts of the existing tour operas and I started to learn the principal roles in each opera in my voice range. I thought this would help if I was asked at any time to understudy it. As I have already said I was a little dejected missing Winifred and our new addition Janet, and after a little while I must have looked terribly sad when I was approached by my boss who asked the reason why. And I of course told him, and he said how would you like to have her also to come and work with us. I have a place for her in the wardrobe department if she would like it.

I was over the moon. When I left home my dear wife carried on the little insurance job I had acquired from my father, and on hearing my request for Winifred to join me my parents must have thought they had lost us for ever. But no, that was not the case and as it has turned out it was the best move we had ever made. My father eventually took back the business he had given me and so gave my wife the chance to join me.

We must be very fair about this change of attitude to life. My parents did not want us



to change our mode of life and we also had our infant to look after. It was decided that our child should stay with my parents, for the time being anyway. So my wife, like me, left the Welsh valleys for good. We visited of course but never lived there again. She joined me in Liverpool. After much trepidation, I had, on the day she was to join me arranged with my landlady that we should give her a right royal welcome as best as we could, to have a nice tea laid out, with flowers etc. But it did not quite turn out like that.

She was to arrive I think somewhere between three and four o'clock in the afternoon and I was at the station to meet her, but she did not arrive.

I went on waiting at the station but still no Winifred. There were no mobile phones in those days to find out where she was, so I realised that she had missed the train. Calamity! Calamity! Time was now progressing and it was time for me to go to the theatre to prepare for the opera and no Winifred. Of course I was dejected and worried not knowing where she had got to. We were half way through the opera in a break when we were not on stage and I was imagining all sorts of things, when a call came from below saying "Williams there is a woman at the stage door asking for you". I was down those stairs as fast as my legs could carry me and there she was, my darling had arrived at last. O what joy, I was with my loved one again. Winifred was now a member of the company and the both of us then settled down to our work and carried on for the rest of the tour.

Where we went to I have no idea as we were constantly travelling from one town to another. This was wonderful as we were seeing parts of the country that we had only dreamed about and we were being paid for it. There was also a rumour going around that our tour would be extended to a trip abroad. Everyone had it on their lips because the war was at an end and we were to go to Germany to entertain our troops. The war with Japan was on-going unfortunately, but this was terrific news for us personally as we were now together and were going to see something of Europe. To see for ourselves what problems and damage that had been done to buildings and also to people's lives by this shocking catastrophe. We eventually finished the tour and were called to a meeting with the management who made it official that we indeed were going on this tour of West Germany to entertain the troops, and that all of us had to be fitted to wear British uniforms. We were informed that this fitting was to take place at the Drury Lane Theatre and were given officers uniforms. I thought this was a little ironic as I had been discharged from the army some years earlier. The only difference was on our shoulder badge which said E.N.S.A. instead of a regiment.



We were to be inoculated against this & that and everything else, in fact we had thirteen jabs altogether but where this took place I cannot remember. Most of us took this in our stride but there were one or two casualties with fainting etc. which we were not surprised at. Thirteen times is not funny. It was then suggested we have a week's holiday and were instructed to go and claim one week unemployment. This was a pleasant surprise and as we had no home in London it was an opportunity to go home to Wales and visit our parents. They were obviously glad to see us and the first thing we did was to sign on at the labour exchange for the weeks unemployment benefit at Abertillery.

My memory will not carry me back far enough to remember how much we did receive for one week's unemployment money, but within the couple of minutes I was at the counter, I was offered instead of unemployment benefit but a job there and then in the labour exchange. Of course I had to refuse, saying that my normal job was waiting for me in one week's time.

We enjoyed our week at home seeing our parents and meeting old friends. While walking in the peacefulness of our countryside we could not realise at that time what devastation and horror we were about to see for ourselves when we arrived in the country which had been the centre of hostilities. We do say that all good things come to an end, and so it was for us. The time had arrived when we had to depart for pastures new, a little apprehensive of what we were about to encounter.

12. And So To Germany

We had to arrange our own lodgings so we arranged to stay at the address we always used while staying in the city. The place was reasonable as long as you ignored the possibility of the mice having your breakfast before you did. So we arrived at our lodgings but were asked by the landlady if we would not mind changing our room for one night as she had allocated our original room to someone else. Of course we did not mind and were given a room higher up the house. We went to bed as we were tired and I felt something bite me. We put the light on and Win gave out such a yell I tell you. I have never before or since seen so many bed bugs, they were everywhere. We pulled the bed to the centre of the room and hoped for the best. We did not sleep a wink that night. It seemed that our troubles had already started and we had not even left England. So after conversation with the landlady, from which we got no satisfaction, although we showed her enough evidence to prove our point of view we departed on our way to the Theatre. This was to be the collection point before going on our travels.

Eventually we left London on our way to Tilbury, arriving at 4.00pm on Tuesday the 28th August 1945. We sailed the same day at 7.30pm on the troopship "Ulster Monarch", arriving at Ostend at 7.00pm the next day after an uneventful journey – thank goodness. Men were put in trucks and the women were given the comfort of buses, although even the buses had wooden slatted seats, and we were transported to the hotel Trienon in Louisa's Place for our accommodation.



Ulster Monarch

Everyone welcomed us with open arms. We had started off very well. There was no damage to the hotel which was a beautiful place with good continental service. We also had a room to ourselves which surprised us but was very welcome considering that we had not had any sleep for some considerable time. We did not appreciate the interruption of a thunderstorm which obviously happened at the wrong time. I cannot remember how long we stayed in Ostend but we did have time to go out and view the city. We bought a little ornamental dagger for Win to use as a brooch and a memento of our visit. We had a look around the city and found a great deal of war damage except for the cathedral which seemed to have escaped relatively unscathed. There were plenty of shops open and we found that fruit was plentiful and cheap but other goods were very expensive.

We left Ostend at 7.00am on a rail journey to Hamburg. What a journey that was. It took us 28 hours. It was an experience never to be forgotten. We crossed quite a wide river which I took to be the river Waal, a tributary of the river Rhine by pontoon bridge. This was in itself quite frightening as we had never up until then had experience of pontoon bridges. Both of us were quite scared as all we could see out of the window on both sides of the carriage was water. We travelled at about 1 mile an hour, swaying from side to side. Looking up the river we could see the bridge we should have crossed by. It was nothing but a mass of twisted metal and it had been a very large bridge. I came to believe that this was the bridge at Nijmegen in the capturing of which many lives were lost. We were travelling on the one and only railway line available in Europe at that time, passing through countries like Belgium, Holland and North Germany. We passed through towns such as Gent, Gennepe, Osnabruch, Antwerp, Minden, Hanover and so to Hamburg. We arrived at 11.30 in the morning.

Previously we partook breakfast at Gennepe in the most peculiar fashion. Water had infiltrated into the dining area, so planks of wood had been placed in position. While we had our breakfast, water was lapping around our feet. Hamburg had taken a hammering. It looked as if there was not a complete building standing and this



applied to most of the places we visited. We were welcomed with open arms at the Hotel Lindon Baccaccio Casino in the Kirchenallee. Good food, good waiting. Waiters spoke very little English. Win and I had a room to ourselves with twin beds and two washbasins. They even drew our bathwater for us. We lived like Lords. There were no shops or it appeared so and the people had no food. How they managed to get by was indeed a miracle,

but for us we were given the best of everything. The mark had lost its value and the currency for the time was cigarettes. One could buy anything with cigarettes.

We had started our entertaining the troops and everything was going well, but the undercurrent of feeling was there. E.N.S.A. under who's auspices we were performing, or should I say the Entertainments National Service Association had done everything possible to put on entertainment for us, which among other's was the Hamburg Philharmonic orchestra which was indeed very enjoyable. But we could not get rid of the 'not wanted' feeling. Unfortunately shots were fired through our hotel window and on another occasion one of our leading singers was shot, and it was said that he died much later from the wound that was inflicted. Not so pleasant in some ways but very exhilarating in others. My friend and I must have taken leave of our senses one day when we entered a partially whole house armed with plenty of cigarettes and went into a room full of Germans to barter.

Whatever for, I now cannot remember. We got out, but when we returned to our hotel we wondered why we had done such a stupid thing, but as you see I am still here to tell the tale.

The ladies of the company were also able to join in with this buying with cigarettes. There was a lady hairdresser that came into the theatre and would do a complete hairdo for five cigarettes. She was kept busy I can tell you. We come to understand that the postal system was in tatters, understandable really as there was no transport from town to town. A letter posted in Hamburg stayed in Hamburg. So if your relatives lived in a different town that was just bad luck. So I will tell you a little story about someone in this situation.

My dear wife was having a hairdo one day and the hairdresser asked if she would do her a favour. Of course she said and so the hairdresser said 'I understand you are visiting Berlin while in Germany. Would you be so kind as to post a letter for me when you arrive'. My wife agreed of course and left it at that. We forgot about it as we got on with our daily routine but come the last day this lady turned up with a letter and a parcel, and said would we post the letter when we arrived in Berlin. This we did with quite a few misgivings as far as the parcel was concerned. We came to the last day in Berlin without anything happening after posting the letter and we were discussing as to what to do with the parcel when a call came from the stage door. There was an elderly couple stood there with tears in their eyes saying that they had received the letter and it was from their daughter. They were so pleased and happy to know that she was still alive. They went away with their parcel as happy as could be. We thought it had all been worthwhile.

In Hamburg, as presumably throughout Germany there was very little food. People were rationed to half a pound loaf of bread per family per week, and they would give 50 marks for the same thing on the black market. That was worth in sterling at that time about one pound five shillings. Vegetables including potatoes were non-existent, also no fruit either. How they existed at this time I will never know.

The shows are going well. The service men seem to be enjoying the classical music and in our spare time we are taken around the city seeing some of the damage that had been done. People were living three or four stories up in buildings which had its frontage blown out, with only a curtain to shelter them from the weather. There was a curfew in force and it was amazing to see the street full with people one minute and empty the next. The people just dived into the nearest cellar. Those who wanted to were taken to differing places to see more of the damage and Win and I joined in the party that visited the submarine pens. The destruction was unbelievable. We sailed down the river Elbe on a ship called the Stevedore 11 owned by Henschel and Co. I wonder if they are still in business. We had a lovely sail down river but all we saw on either side of the river was twisted metal. At last we came to the submarine pens. One had to see this to believe it. Looking back now to that time over 60 years ago one would think that bombs could not have been so destructive but there before us we could see the destruction caused by these missiles.

The roof protecting the U boats was 16 feet thick and made of concrete yet the missiles went through it like butter. Of course most of the U boats that were there were out of commission, and I saw one that had been blown out of the water and was stuck to the concrete wall. The men there at the time did not stand a chance. It was nothing less than carnage.

We returned at last to the comfort of our hotel which seemed very ironical at the time considering all the devastation we had seen. It hurt our feelings also to be provided with such delicious meals, and tempting things such as cream cakes and drinks the like of which we had never heard of before, when the population outside were scratching for a bit of bread. I had intended to take notes of most everything that we did, but all I seemed to do was take notes of damage and more damage, so I gave up and am now trusting to memory. We all as I have mentioned wore officers uniform so when my friend and I were walking in the street we were approached by a couple of soldiers. One could see them stiffen themselves and salute smartly, but when they saw the ENSA shoulder flash one could see the look on their faces which dropped our standing to rock bottom. Especially when my companion saluted with his left hand.

We met a soldier friend of ours out there, a Mr Bill Howell, and spent some time with him talking of old times, what he was up to at that time. Although soldiers or anyone else were not allowed to divulge any important information. He is now sadly not with us but we still keep in touch with his wife Freda.

A party of us were invited to visit the Officers country club. Originally it was one of the homes of Hermann Goering. It was really a beautiful place, luxuriously furnished, doors built into marvellously carved woodwork, private swimming pool and games room, perfect lighting with candle chandelier and also a fantastic staircase. We had tea on the veranda in beautiful sunshine and we were very sorry to leave, but leave we had to.

We had also come to the end of our stay in Hamburg and we left there at 10 o'clock on Sunday the 23rd Sept 1945 and travelled through the countryside bypassing Hanover and Minden. On the way we stopped at the camp called Belsen. Seeing the horror of that place, was I think, the reason why I gave up making notes. We were seeing tragedy day after day. Belsen was not a pretty sight. When we arrived there the camp had been burned down or at least most of it because it had been liberated on the 15th April 1945. The last hut had been destroyed on the 21st May 1945. 60,000 people had died there before liberation, and 13,000 since with 10,000 still unburied. 85% had been Jews. It was said that the camp had been built for 5,000 but it held over 57,000 and that was overcrowding to the amount of 11 to 1.

We were told these facts by the officer who showed us around. He also said that the average number of people that were exterminated in one day was 600, but we were given to understand from another source that the actual number in one day was 13,000 with as many as 800 buried in one grave.

We were beginning to get sickened by these statistics but more was to come. Previously it had been a German army camp but had been converted to a Russian prisoner of war camp when 100,000 Russians died. (What is man that thou art mindful of him). I could not believe that man could stoop so low. How we managed to eat our tea after all that I do not know but we did. We started on the last stage of our journey to our next port of call which was the town of Detmold at which we arrived at 8.00 that evening.

It was very dark so we did not see anything of the town until the next day. We stayed at a place called Hotel Furst Leopold in the Wiesen Strasse. We were entertained here. Food etcetera, which incidentally was not very good, but our sleeping accommodation was in a different building called Pension Bullman in the Schaler Strasse. We had a very tidy bedroom with beds made up in German fashion or so we were told, overlay underneath and feather bed on top. The water here was not fit to drink. It was not even plentiful enough to wash with and hot water was at a premium. There was only a very small theatre which was Prince Bernhards private one and the town being so small there was nothing for us to see or do. Hardly any damage to be seen. That is perhaps why the townspeople were so arrogant.

I must say they did not like us at all, therefore not such a good reception. The performances went very well and everyone enjoyed them. There was no black market but we did walk around the town and a really quaint town it was. There were no shops that we could see, so it seemed that we were at a loose end. But we were offered a trip to Bad-Salzuflen to the officers club called The Bath Club and we enjoyed that immensely,

This was another ancient town but the building we entered was really magnificent. We had lunch there and it was served up well. We had a very nice time. Drinks were plentiful and when we left we were given tea and a good assortment of cream cakes. All I seem to be telling you is how pleasant it was staying at these lovely hotels while all around us was misery, but it was all so true.

What a different life we were living now compared to the humdrum life of our home village. Another week has passed and it is time to be on our travels again. We were not sorry to leave Detmold and as far as I remember our next port of call was Berlin, but the capital of Germany was about 260 miles away. This was a sobering thought, how many of us would be fit enough to do anything by the end of the journey. We did not have posh limos to speed us on our journey. All we had was a few little buses with slatted seats which looked as if they would break down any minute.

Anyway we left Detmold at 8 o'clock in the morning and travelling on what trunk roads were available. We proceeded with due care and attention. On quite a number of occasions we travelled the side roads which was quite a change from the monotonous ribbon of road which the trunk roads gave you. The side roads gave us a further helping hand. They did give a romantic look to the countryside with the green fields, hedgerows and farmsteads, and perhaps best of all, the trees.

There is a story, no it is the truth about those trees. As you might know toilets around those parts were at a premium. None in fact, so every time we came upon a plantation of sorts someone would shout trees and the buses would stop and we would disembark. The ladies would go to the right and the men to the left. Quite hilarious really especially as we were a posh theatre company, but on the other hand we were still human and we were out to get as much fun as possible and our physical requirements had to be satisfied

The journey seemed endless and at about 2 in the afternoon we entered the Russian zone. The company seemed to get a little jittery and we proceeded as fast as those buses could take us only stopping for necessities as I have just explained. We arrived in Berlin at 7 o'clock that evening absolutely worn out. I have no idea how the drivers must have felt. We had a very good reception from the military bigwigs as always I am glad to say.

Our stay in this once wonderful city was terrific. We had very good accommodation and the food again was better than we could get at home. I know that most Berliners hated us but we were treated very well. We performed in a very nice theatre and everyone enjoyed themselves if the extent of their applause was anything to go by. Of course we were able to go out and explore, but as in all the places we visited all we could see was ruins. We did manage to go and see the ruined Reichstag and go into Hitler's main room and see the walls and ceiling, once beautiful now a shattered memory. The lovely glass chandeliers, fallen from their lofty heights, spreading their pieces of glass all around.

I stood on Hitler's desk, and on the remnants of wood that had once been a lovely piece of furniture that had stood for leadership, and now through mismanagement had brought a country to its knees. I thought of how many soldiers, sailors, airmen and indeed civilians had to give their lives to achieve this. And I grieved.

We enjoyed our stay in Berlin but we had to continue the tour. I must say at this point if indeed I have not said it before that this trip was not all sightseeing. We were working very hard. We who were in front of the audience might be getting all the applause, but those working back stage including my Winifred were working a lot harder. Again we left on the Sunday as always with the horrible thought that we had to return the same way as we came, 230 miles in uncomfortable buses.

This we achieved in eleven hours from eight o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock in the evening. Our objective was a lovely place called Bad-Oeynhausen which was the headquarters of the 21st Army group. We had quite nice sleeping accommodation in a house outside the town. It must have been home to some well-to-do family, but all their belongings had been pilfered and only one or two things were left. Six wine glasses took our eye and an officer said to take them if we liked them because they would only get smashed if we left them. So we packed them in a cardboard box in our little bit of luggage and said they will never get to England without being broken. But they have graced our china and glass cabinet to this day. We really thought our sleeping accommodation was terrific, but the hotel we had for

general living was fantastic. It was the Hotel Victoria in the Mittlestrasse. It was a lovely hotel with some beautiful buildings near by. It was a very little town with beautiful grounds to walk in, and again surprisingly enough very little damage. As was expected I suppose there were very few civilians about as three quarters of the town was taken over by the military. There were two cinemas and presumably we went to a performance in our spare time but my memory fails me as to what we saw. The officers threw a party for us which was very enjoyable. It was at this party that we tasted Champagne for the first time, and Win and I thought it very much overrated. I do not think we have indulged ever since but we had a very good time. The food that was served up to us in this hotel was of five star quality and the cream cakes were in abundance. A few months earlier we could only dream of anything like this happening to us. But again we had to move on and we were sorry to leave. Again I must remind you that we were performing for the soldiers every night with full houses. Back stage personnel were working their socks off such as wardrobe, scene shifters, electricians and the like to make anything possible at all.

Dusseldorf was our next stop. We left Bad-Oeynhausen at 10.30am on our usual travelling day which was a Sunday and arrived at our destination at about 5.30 in the evening. We bypassed the town of Hamm but went into the town of Dortmund. There was terrible damage here. If it is possible to say it, the worse we had seen yet. On then to Essen. More damage. The Krupps factory was nothing but twisted metal and I remember somebody saying that the factory covered ten square miles of space and not a square metre was left standing. It had also employed somewhere in the region of 80,000 people. I shudder to think what happened to all those people when the bombs fell.

So we duly arrived at Essen about 5.30pm after a 150 mile journey. We stayed at the new E.N.S.A. Hotel and a very nice place it was too, with a good games room. So after another long trip we had landed in very nice accommodation. All this good living seemed incongruous after seeing so much damage and poverty, but I was sure that we were going to enjoy our stay here. Unfortunately I really must depend on my memory now and I have a long way to go before the end of this epistle is in sight.

During this tour although I was accepted into the company as a chorister, I was asked to play small parts and I nearly made it to the top when the powers that be asked me to play Colene, the principal bass-baritone part in La Boheme. Norman Walker, a very good singer, was supposed to do it but called off only two weeks before the performance. I was word perfect within the two weeks and ready to go on stage. And would you believe it, he turned up so I lost my chance for fame. The management said they would remember me when we got back to London, but that never happened because we had a new administrator by then and for the time being I was forgotten. But I must have had a fair voice to have been chosen in the first place.

The year is still 1945 and the war with Germany is over, but Japan is still unwilling to give in. We in Germany are about to leave for England. We must have performed in

a few other places of which I have no memory at all, but at some point we did arrive in Cologne. I have said this time and time again, but it has never left my mind. 'What Devastation'. The only building left standing was the Cathedral. How our airmen managed to miss it was a miracle. There were no bridges across the river except a pontoon bridge, with an endless queue of refugees trying to find a place to settle down. How or where we embarked for our homeward journey I cannot remember, but home we came. I think we had a week's holiday as I remember. Win and I went home to Wales to visit our parents.

I remember that as we were still in our officer's uniform. It was good to see the parents and talk of our experiences and walk the hills that we knew so well. But as always everything good or bad must come to an end and we had to prepare to return to London for the beginning of the new operatic season. Now that the war was over as far as Germany was concerned, London was getting back to normal and we returned to our own theatre to start the new season. The format would be much the same as always as we were still a small company as opera companies go. We made good performances of operas like La Boheme, The Bartered Bride, Tosca, Faust and such like and we played to full houses most of the time. Of course we rehearsed every morning to get acquainted with new operas which would then be entered into our repertoire. But to put an opera on takes a tremendous amount of work as do most theatrical productions. The principals have to learn their separate parts, the chorus also. Scene painters and builders, designer's, electrician's, wardrobe, orchestra and many others, not of course forgetting the producers. Sorry Mr Guthrie.

13. London

Being an opera singer is a special job, just like being a painter or a carpenter. The one big problem about it is that there is no room for mistakes as everything is immediate. Other singers are waiting for their cue in, or in other words we are all dependant on one another or else the show is a flop.

We are now back at our own theatre, working and living the usual humdrum life that any job brings with it, but I must impress on all my readers that this was the musical life I had wanted ever since I first picked up my violin. I was singing and also listening to my well-loved classical music. Win and I would go to the Royal Albert Hall when we were able and listen to the finest orchestras and various solo artists. Go up on the 'top layer' and be charged two shillings and six pence to sit on the floor, walk back and fro, or lean on the rail. Quite a number of students would be sitting on the floor studying the score of the music being played and taking notes on the conductors interpretation. Those were the days. At the same time I had to visit my voice trainer, and remember I was in London now and trainers did not come cheap. I did not have Dorothy Davies to fall back on.

I was progressing very well in learning the current repertoire and memorising even the orchestration, because having to remove my spectacles for every performance I had to trust the orchestra and not the conductor, as I could not see him especially when we had brilliant stage lighting. It did not interfere with my performance once I got used to it. It was at this period in time that London especially had very thick fogs to deal with. We called them "pea-souper", and I was late myself getting to the theatre on this one night.

We could hardly see our hand in front of us and that was outside. We prepared for the performance, dressed and made up as we say, prepared for curtain up. Once the curtain went up we could not see anything and neither could the audience see us. It was the only time in the twelve years I was at The Wells that a performance was cancelled and I remember that it was La Traviata.

OPERA DISCONTINUED

Because the theatre was full of fog the Sadler's Wells opera *La Traviata* had to finish last night after the first act. The manager told the audience that it would be unfair to go on and that seat money would be refunded. He added that this was the first time the theatre had had to close in such circumstances.

Article taken from The Times newspaper (9th Dec 1952)

Everything was going on as normal when it occurred to Winifred that we were feeling settled in the job that I had chosen and we would like our daughter to be in her rightful place with her Mum and Dad. So in our spare time we started looking around for a place of our own to live. Win was the decision maker of the pair of us.

She seemed to do the right thing at the right time, but we never did anything without the other agreeing. So that meant it took some time for our ideas to come to fruition. But the problem of finding a place of our own was a decision we had to make as soon as possible. Finding a place was a different matter and money, or the lack of it, was still a problem.

14. On Tour



In the meantime the show had to go on and yet another tour was in our sights. We visited such places as Bristol which as I have explained had vivid memories for us, Manchester, Oxford, Liverpool, Leeds, Southsea, Bournemouth and the like. We were seeing places that were just names on a map just a short time earlier, but we really did not like touring. To begin with when the company had decided where we were going to visit, the list with dates and duration would go up on the notice board. We would then pick up pen and paper and start writing to our favourite landladies in each town to book our room for each town we would be visiting. It usually worked very well if one had

been there before, but if it was first time of asking you were usually unlucky and that meant you arrived in the town with no place to go to lay your head. We were not paid enough in those days to book a room in a hotel. This happened to Win and I at Wolverhampton. We arrived with it pouring with rain. Our suitcase we left at the theatre and walked to the place where theatrical lodgings were situated. We knocked at doors and got no response. No room anywhere. I could have sat in the road and wept, but we gave it another go and at last we were accepted in one house. Although it was not what we would have liked, but beggars cannot be choosers.

It turned out to be a lorry drivers turn around lodgings, not that there is anything wrong with lorry drivers, but when we sat down to a meal Win was the only lady surrounded by about eight or ten men. That was not the worse problem. It was the meals. That was the trouble. I do not think in the time we were there that we actually knew what the meal was supposed to be. They all turned out like soup without the taste to go with it. Some lodgings were bad for unwanted company. We would go to bed with a bowl of water, and every crawling thing we caught that was after our blood we would throw in the water and take the bowl down in the morning to show

them to the landlady. But she would not believe us. Where she thought we had got them from I do not know. 'Digs' as they were known were usually very good and the landladies looked on their lodgers as sons and daughters, but one or two were indeed pretty seedy.

My favourite landlady was a dear old lady who lived in Osney, a district in Oxford. She was fantastic. I think there were two of us staying with her at this particular visit when we the chorus sung the sound track for the film 'The Tales of Hoffmann'. Every day of that week we travelled to the Pinewood film studios near Slough at 9.30am for rehearsals, break for our sandwiches at mid-day, did the recording in the afternoon then returned to the theatre to do the evening opera. It was a very busy week and our dear landlady saw to all our needs as if we were her own children.

We were on tour when Japan packed in their war with us. Win and I went with quite a few of the company into a pub in Wolverhampton to celebrate the occasion, to find our stage manager dancing on a table and waving a half full jar of beer around his head spilling most of it over himself. But he was enjoying every minute of it. The best part of the tour was arriving at Southsea and Bournemouth. This was when we had our annual holidays. (It was cheaper to do this when we had our two children than for me to send money home.) I was earning six pounds a week at the theatre, so you can see I never had much money to play with. If we played parts in an opera we were paid one pound extra for a principal role, with fifteen, ten and five shillings for small parts. Taking it all in all we did not do badly while we were on tour. There was quite a system in going from one venue to another. We carried about four or five opera's with us, so when one was finished with the stage staff would put the scenery and everything to do with that opera into a truck (or trucks), whisking it all off to the next port of call. The same thing would happen as far as the costume department was concerned and that was where Win took pride of place. At this point I think I will insert into my narrative a report that came out in an Irish newspaper on a Saturday in September 1945 while we were performing at Belfast. What the name of the journalist is who wrote it is lost in the mists of time, but this was his report after interviewing the ladies of the wardrobe:-

OPERA WITHOUT THE MUSIC OR

UNPACKING A SKIP WITH SADLERS WELLS.



Narrow platform miles above the stage; acreage of empty boards far below; foreshortened figures of stage staff moving like bees in a beehive; scenery stacked against the walls; electrical equipment spread around; properties piled here and there...

Busy place that stage, and at half-nine in the morning too. There is a brave bit of work to be done before the curtain goes up at half seven tonight, but not all of it is done on the stage. Come away through this door, along the corridor, and into this long, narrow, low ceilinged room, away up near the roof of the opera house. Meet Sadler's Wells wardrobe mistress- the lady who gets no limelight, and never hears the encouraging sweetness of the applause. 'No show without Punch' opera without the wardrobe mistress. She is bright, alert, and cheerful. At the moment she is ironing what looks like Granddad's night shirt. She smiled 'Oh no' she said 'it's an under slip for Butterfly. That is, a foundation garment for one of those gorgeous embroidered dresses which daub the Madam Butterfly scene with vivid colour. 'We wash all the whites after every time they are worn' 'if we can' she added 'we are our own laundry'. Domestic side of grand opera- her two assistants were similarly occupied. No theatrical glamour, just ordinary work. 'Time does not count for much' she said 'I mean time table hours the work has to be done, so we do it – no matter about the clock. Truly domestic at that rate... women's work is never done and all that. Costumes were all over the place – on the walls, on a rack down the centre of the floor, on the shelves, and in the skips. You cannot skip the skips in touring opera. 'We have only four opera's with us' said she 'but we have 62 skips, about 500 costumes, and about 500 wigs. If we were travelling eight opera's 'she said 'as we do in England, we would have at least 75 skips'.

Not always as easy as here. In some theatres the stairs are so narrow that they cannot carry the skips up to the room, so the unpacking has to be done on the

ground floor and the costumes carried up individually. Work, any amount of it, but look at the compensations, life lived for music, colour, and the life of the stage, brightness, lights' she said. They never saw a show but they knew them inside out – all of them. "We see a bit now and again from the wings or the flies".

Later I stood beside the stage manager in his corner when 'Butterfly' was in full swing, and he was writing a letter home. Madam Butterfly's romance's was not taking a hair out of him.

The costumes are not a lot of bother really. The wardrobe ladies work to a system. They know where every dress is, where it ought to be, and where it is going to be. She showed me the sheet listing the contents of the numbered skips. 'It seems a lot, but you get used to them. Bits and pieces are the trouble. People just think of costumes. They forget the bits, fans, head-dresses, things like that. Mrs Pinkerton tonight has to have umbrella, bag, handkerchief.....The artist has no bother at all, we have to see that it is all there ready to put on. So the soprano can concentrate on her coloratura and the tenor to seek soul in his top note.

One of the girls came flourishing in 'O Vida' she pleaded 'Could I do a tiny bit of ironing darling.....O thanks ever so. I will wash a blouse a well. Thanks darling'. She was the third to come pleading - the iron is in great demand. 'Doing up clothes is the girl's problem on tour' said the wardrobe mistress, 'You cannot rely on laundries'.

Most of the costumes were made at Sadler's Wells. 'We only do repairs and alterations' said she, 'Not many alterations but sometimes we would have a new girl in the chorus, and the dress would have to be let out or taken in, bits shifted and all that. Madam Butterfly,. Tonight's show is very heavy' she picked up a costume, 'Feel that' she said, Weighty enough at about 20 lbs.

She took one costume in each hand, stretched her arms high to prevent the hems trailing the floor, and sailed down to a dressing room looking herself, like some gigantically gorgeous butterfly. Here is the dressing room. Last night's costumes still hung around the walls. 'Butterfly costumes are big and weighty' she said, ' Take up a lot of room, so I will have to pack up these Bartered Bride frocks, We will dig out B,B, again when it is on'. The mirrors in the room were autographed in red makeup, Winifred, Jean, Mollie, Olwen,.....' 'Mark their spot on the first Monday' said she '. Powder, paint and pictures.....the usual aromatic litter of a dressing room. She took down a couple of blouses, 'These things will have to be washed and ironed' said she 'you would be surprised how grubby they get even after one night's wear. See'. The neck bands were soiled with makeup. 'You would think they had been worn for a week, it is not the costumes you see them wearing, it is these hidden garments that cause the work'.

Opera in slacks and jumpers would be a lot easier to handle. 'Yes' she agreed 'But not so interesting'

One opera in the repertoire is a soft affair for the wardrobe. 'La Boheme' said she, 'Boheme is a tat opera.....no elaborate costumes'. Today is a busy day, non-stop

until about eleven tonight. It is matinee day, but it is not as busy as this every day. 'Other days we have the afternoon off' she says. 'Costumes take some handling but as each opera is finished for the season we pack it up' says she. So when the last night in the theatre arrives they have only the one lot to pack. The rest has already been sent off to the next town. She kept rightly busy. There is nothing dopey about the modern wardrobe mistress. The old—time type of wardrobe mistress and dresser could not work her passage in opera at all these days. But I feel as if I am a cog on the wheels of progress. I will let them get on with their work.

I went down to the stage. The set was ready. The electrician was working at an elaborate dimming apparatus. He looked a trifle mournful. 'A full time occupation' he said. 'But one thing about a three week season ---- you do get time to see the place. Some towns when you are there for only a week, all you see is the theatre, your bedroom, and the nearest pub'. Opera may be High Art, with capital letters, but there is a lot of hard work behind it (but is it not the same in nearly everything. The finished article does not tell the whole story. It only crowns it.) The wardrobe mistress suddenly appeared through the swing door, 'Would you like to see Butterfly's wedding dress' she asked, I could not say no - never could, to a woman anyway. We went up the stairs. The assistant had the dress out for inspection. Yards and yards of satin and pure silk' she enthused, It was really beautiful, and this is Butterfly's first act dress' said she 'I think this is lovely'. So it was, yards and yards of intricate oriental embroidery, all hand worked. Weeks of patient toil in it. A bit on the gaudy side, maybe 'O yes' she agreed 'but when the lights are on it....it's lovely'.

You know the pair of them looked at those two dresses as if there was never a dress in the world like them. They are women as well as ladies of the wardrobe.

I went down to the office. The director was at his desk typing a letter. The secretary was busy with some files. Was the office equipment on loan, 'O no' said he, 'we travel the contents of two offices with us.....this and one for the music section' Big business on the move. ' About 26 tons of the stuff' said he 'All our own electrical equipment, all scenery and props, every piece of furniture, orchestra, costumes, wigs.....but that will do I think. .I will be forgetting there is such a thing as the opera itself if I listen to any more. It is nearly eight o'clock at night. Act 1 of Butterfly is on its way. Light, colour, beauty, music.....'see that Japanese lettering on those curtains' said the director ' that is real Japanese, it says, Sadlers Wells Opera Company has the honour to present Madam Butterfly.

There is no end to it.....

I am getting a bit bewildered. Time I was away. But the curtain comes down. The applause crescendos into a mountain peak of enthusiasm. The chorus and principals, dresses swaying, head-dresses and makeup looking fantastically crude, swept passed me on their way for a dressing room breather.

And behind comes the wardrobe lady, carrying Butterfly's wedding dress as if it were something truly precious. Just a job.....No I do not think so, it is another angle of art.

So there we have it, one journalists' point of view or should I say a bird's eye view of a first class company's touring arrangements. That I think was only three weeks of a sixteen week tour. One got a little fed up with being on the road for so long. It was fine if you were visiting for the first time, but when it became regular on the tour list it became a little monotonous. The managers of other theatres and cinema's were usually quite generous to touring artists and would let us in free to see a performance at their venues, as long as we showed our union or Equity card.

This of course was only when our company was performing an opera, where for once in a while we were not required. One such opera is Madam Butterfly where there is no bass part written in the chorus section. So therefore we have a night off. While we were in Belfast we did manage a trip to the Mountains of Mourne, and I forgot to tell you in my hurry of our journey in getting to Belfast.

Our trip started at Euston station and then boarding a train for Stranraer in Scotland. Then by boat to Belfast. It took a very long time and Win and I had agreed to have a bath when we arrived. But when we arrived at our 'digs' I just lay on the bed and went to sleep. Win could not wake me. What time I did awake I know not, but I knew very little until the next morning.

15. Settling in London

We obviously went on with our tour but thoughts for both of us were on our little one who was still being looked after by my parents back in Wales, and no doubt ably assisted by my dear wife's parents. We so wanted to have her with us to make the family complete but this would mean finding permanent lodgings, or preferably a house to live in. We also realised that Win would have to give up working for the company and to stay home to look after the child. All this was not going to be easy. 1945 progressed into 1946 and we were still contemplating the move which would have to come sooner than later. I was still enthralled by the music I was hearing and singing, realising that we had made the right decision in coming into this musical life. Win was of the same mind I might add, but look for a house we had to. So now the time had arrived to say WHERE. Anywhere in London was out of the question as houses were too expensive. Then we thought of the underground system. Could we be lucky there because I thought then that I had to be within striking distance of the theatre. How wrong I was. We found it was as hard to find a house in the right place as the old proverbial needle in a haystack. It was no good looking east of London because we would be further away still from Wales, which would then be a problem for the in-laws. We looked north with the same result. There was a possibility that we might have ended up in Cheam which is south of London, but that idea came to nothing. That left west London, take it or leave it.

Now the theatre at which I was working was in Islington which was in the east of the capital as far as I was concerned, so that meant I would have a long journey to work whatever district we chose to live in. We first of all looked at Ealing. It was a nice enough place and it was the end of the tube railway line. We enquired if the tube line was to be extended and we were assured that there was an extension to be laid as far as Hayes. The prices of houses were as dear as in London and we were thinking of giving up, when as a last resort we said we would try Southall. We were lucky. Some time after and much negotiating we found a house that we could afford and it turned out to be right at the end of a London bus route, the number 105. We obviously had discussions about its suitability, which from my point of view was not all that could be desired, but it seemed that at that moment we had very little choice. (As it happened it turned out quite well). We bought the house. What to put into it we had no idea. I do not want to over-run myself so I will stop here to give myself time to think, you see, we are still only in the early part of 1946. We are now trying to get used to the idea of travelling to work on this new route we had created for ourselves. I will try to explain our route to you. We first had to use the 105 bus route to Southall station, catch the steam train to Paddington, then a tube train to Kings Cross station after which another tube train to The Angel Islington. Hooray we are at the theatre. The journey took us about one hour.

As a passing remark we did get used to it pretty quickly, but as I went through the years I got more adventurous and I found I was doing the journey twice a day instead of only once. That meant four hours travelling time. It cost me no more as I had a season ticket anyway. It meant that I was able to do voice training at home because I was still having voice tuition and therefore I had to get in as much practice as possible. My music, apart from my family, was my passion, so I ate, slept and lived in my music. My heroes the great classical composers of opera and the massive symphonies were my food and drink. I must say that my dear wife was the rock on which my whole family existed. Without her I would have been a dead duck.

So time passed with the daily routine of rehearsals of new opera's and polishing up of old ones. We are now living in our newly acquired house, 94 Brent Rd Southall Middlesex. It certainly was a milestone in our journey through life. It took us time to furnish it as we did not use the never-never system. A new type of furniture had come on to the market since the war. It was cheap and cheerful called Utility Furniture. That was what we



bought, bit by bit to furnish one room up and one room down. Carpets would have to wait and by luck we managed to find two homemade wooden fireside chairs. That would have to do until we could afford something better. When our daughter Janet joined us from Wales we were radiantly happy but this took a little time to achieve, but again I am running too fast in my story. Remember that I told you when I was



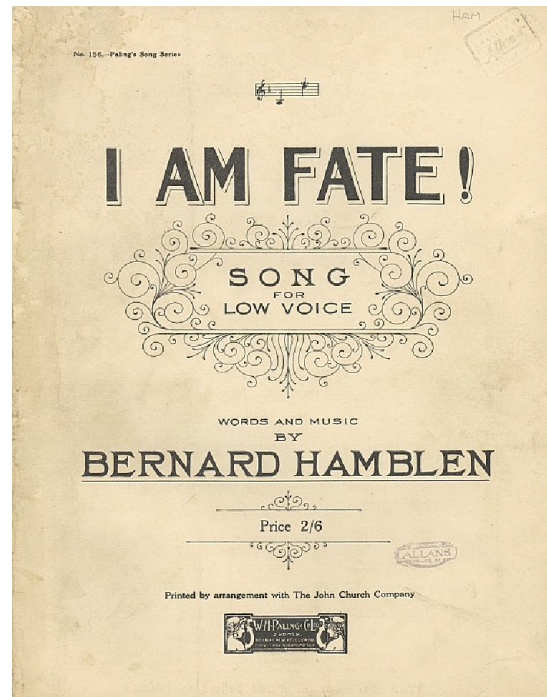
asked to do the principal bass part in La Boheme that all that would be forgotten when we got to England? Well it was. It was a bit disappointing but that's how it goes sometimes. Change of administrator and 'bang' goes all one's preparations and hopes. So instead of going for principal parts I chose to accept parts like 'The Jailer' in 'Tosca', 'The strong man' in the ballet scene from 'The Bartered Bride', 'Count Ceprano' in 'Rigoletto', 'Rugby' in

'Sir John in Love' and others which I enjoyed playing very much. I also accepted character parts with no singing. Doing these parts was great fun. Also around 1948 I came into contact with a composer who was an American, and was a prolific writer of ballads by the name of Bernard Hamblen. How I managed to meet him, and who the person was that introduced us to each other I cannot remember. Neither can I remember where he heard me sing.

He was quite eager to take me to America to sing his songs and so I presume bring his name forward in the ballad writer's fraternity. To ask me this question he took me for lunch at the Savage Club. That must have cost him a bob or two as I was given to understand that it was the most elite entertainers club in London.

He gave me a copy of his latest composition at that time, the name of it was, 'I am Fate'. A very powerful song which I sang. I still have the copy that he gave me but I have not heard a word of or about Mr Hamblen since. I did not accept his invitation. I often wonder if I did right or wrong. Had I accepted, these few words would never have been written.

We were settling down in our new home by now getting to know our neighbours and the lie of the land. Win had finished working for the opera company and was at home looking after our daughter, not forgetting myself as she was a marvellous cook, wife and mother. Dorothy the younger sister of my dear wife was still in Wales but was getting a little of the wanderlust in her veins. There was no hope of getting any decent job there so she asked us if she could come and stay with us. To see if she could procure a job where work was more available, to which we said 'of course you can', so she came to live with us. She found work but what it was I cannot remember.



16. Family Life

We must now return to about the year 1949. Janet our daughter was about six years old when Win and I decided it was time for Janet to have a brother or sister and so it happened that Romaine was born in 1950. She was a darling and obviously still is, and on the day when mother and daughter came home from hospital it was snowing quite heavily. Dear Mrs Bryant, a very friendly neighbour, was most upset to see the snow falling on mother and daughter. She was afraid both would die of the cold. The naming of our two daughters was a little unusual to say the least.



When Janet was born we had not decided on a name for either a boy or a girl, so when Win was asked for a name she immediately said Janet without further ado. She often wondered since whether she had done the right thing, but it is a nice name and we have loved it ever since. Now as far as Romaine was concerned her name was chosen some time before she arrived. It all started while we were touring with the company. We always travelled from place to place on a Sunday and we had the theatre ballet company with us. Two young ladies of the ballet liked to be in the same coach of the train, and Win seemed to take them under her wing. They were always hungry so they were always sure of being fed. Their names were Fiona Moore and Romaine Austin and we got very fond of those two. Win said if we had another girl we would give her one of those Christian names, and as you notice Romaine came out of the hat first. If it had been a boy his name would have been Roger Arnold Williams, but that was never to be. Janet has told me since that she was very jealous of her new sister when she first arrived. This was understandable as Janet was only seven at the time and a new baby is always the centre of attention.

By this time Dorothy had found a very respectable boyfriend named Ronald Noone and she surprised us all by saying they were getting married. This was wonderful because all the family came from Wales to join with us to celebrate on this happy occasion. Janet was nine years old and was a bridesmaid, while of course Romaine was only two. The married couple settled for some time also in Southall.

Shortly after this I must have started another tour which as always would end up with stays at Bournemouth and Southsea. This as I have already stated was holiday time for my little family, and this was not going to be any exception.

Winifred managed to get herself and the children plus luggage down to the seaside resort all in one piece. How she did it on her own was a miracle, with Janet only seven years old and Romaine only weeks or a few months to her credit. I was not able to help her as I was coming from my last port of call and that was from a totally different direction. We always enjoyed our stay especially in Bournemouth. Our lodgings there was named 'The White House' and was situated on Derley Chine. They must have been friends of a friend if you see what I mean. We were looked after very well and the lady of the house was delighted to baby sit while Win would come to the theatre and join me to take a lovely walk by the waters edge back to our lodgings. I can see it all now and delight in the memory. At our lodgings there was a gentleman who was either a relative or a handyman who also befriended us considerably. His main job was a waiter at the hotel nearby and this hotel had a private part of the beach to which he frequently visited with refreshments. He suggested that we would play or sit as near to the private part of the beach as possible, so you can guess that he saw to it that we were treated the same as the hotel residents.

There was a type of swingbridge that one could cross the chine on and as the years went by the children enjoyed crossing by this bridge because it had this swinging movement. Yes we certainly enjoyed ourselves in Bournemouth. Time, as we say, never stands still, and as the time passed the children were getting older. Janet was at school and Romaine was by now getting ready to start. Win and I were settling down in our home and thinking how we could make it more comfortable. We were making occasional visits to our parents in Wales and they reciprocated. I know that I managed to get my parents to see the opera 'The Bartered Bride' and they enjoyed it very much, but I think I wore them out in the travelling process. They were more used to the gentle pace of Wales rather than the pace of living in London.

17. Musical Opportunities



I was progressing satisfactorily at my wonderful job at the theatre and enjoying every minute, except when I had to leave my lovely family to go on tour without them. As it surely did when the children were at school. Win had also found a job for herself to make our little bit of money go a little further. She worked for a firm called Tickler's who made jam, but she did not stay in that job for long. She eventually got a very good job in the offices of a French firm called 'Ripolin Paints' which she kept for some time.

At the theatre we every year had a special performance on twelfth night and we all did our bit in excerpts from the opera's, with special people invited who had special ties with Sadlers Wells. And one of those people was Sir Ralph Richardson. When he came on stage I was the first man he shook hands with. I thought I was a big chap but he was larger than I was and his handshake was really meant, but what a personality. I remember it to this day. There were good days and there were bad days. I remember when we were rehearsing 'Dido and Aeneas' by Purcell, we the choir sung our part with the orchestra in the orchestra pit. As it happened we were just rehearsing our parts in the pit when I put my foot through Tony's big drum. Tony was our drummer and I had to go and apologise to him, which I did and I heard nothing more about it, thank goodness. It was an accident I assure you.

Another occasion was when there was a heavy wooden bench on stage which I had forgotten about and I walked right into it as we men rushed on to the stage as the opera required. You try singing opera while one's leg is in terrible pain without the audience knowing anything about it. It is very difficult.

Another small episode when I was quite new to this operatic business was when I was given a small principal role in the opera 'Sir John in Love' by Vaughan Williams (that is if my memory serves me right). The part was that of 'Rugby' who in the opera was the companion of Dr Cias. All the cast was gathered in the rehearsal room under the baton of the conductor Lawrence Collingwood. It is my first rehearsal with him. We start and everything is going fine. I come in at the right point, sing my bit and when I finish he stops and says 'we will do that again please'. So we did it again and again, stopping after I had sung my bit. He did this three or four times and I was getting a little bit hot under the collar.

But at last we carried on and when we did, he gave me a little bow, meaning I suppose that I had passed my test and was capable of being depended on. He never

questioned my ability after that. He was such a clever chap that he could tell when one of the instrumentalists in the orchestra played a wrong note while being conducted by someone else, while he was talking to someone at the back of the theatre. He walked down, stopped the orchestra and told the instrumentalist where he or she had gone wrong. I call that musical ability, but he was the head conductor at the time.

Talking about conductors I have been under the baton of quite a few. The one I have just mentioned, and there was also Sir John Barbirolli, Sir Tommy Beecham, Eric Robinson, Leo Quayle, Marcus Dods (who was also our chorus master), Alexander Gibson, James Robertson, the American Leonard Bernstein and others who are again lost in the mists of time. Charles Mackerras as he was then, played in the woodwind section of the orchestra when I was at the 'Wells', but he certainly has made the grade since then. He has had the honour of becoming Sir Charles. The best of luck to him.

Time as always was passing all too quickly and changes were being made. One of those changes was that we had a new stage manager. It happened that it turned out to be a lady and her name was Patricia Foy known to everyone as Paddy. We happened to work very well together. In the course of time she left the 'Wells' and went to the B.B.C. as a producer, and our friendship paid dividends. At every opportunity she would put my name forward to the B.B.C. and I would be sent a contract. This was good but I was permanently contracted to the Sadlers Wells, so I had to get their permission to do the job, and the B.B.C. had normally to say 'by permission of'. This was O.K. as far as it went, but 'The Wells' were getting a bit suspicious. Very little of any importance was happening at the theatre other than rumours such as 'are we staying at our own theatre' or 'moving to somewhere else'. Or 'are we to close altogether'. Things were looking very uncertain. This was all happening in about the year 1954 or 1955. At about this time another bit of publicity appeared in a local South Wales paper and it read thus:-

Bournemouth Week of Opera has Home Links. Holiday Makers from the Western Valley had a special interest in The Sadlers Wells Opera Company programme at Bournemouth's Pavilion last week. For among those taking part in it was Nantyglo tenor Gwent Lewis and Llanhilleth bass Vernon Williams. Mr Lewis took leading parts. Mr Williams member of the company for ten years is in the chorus and also takes character roles. Formally a young insurance agent at Abertillery, Mr Williams is the son of Mr and Mrs Trevor Williams of 7 Bryn-heulog Terrace, Brynithel, Llanhilleth. As a boy he was a violinist, but later turned to singing. Well known Newbridge soprano Dorothy Davis suggested he should ask Sadlers Wells for an audition. He was given the audition in Bristol and was accepted. In error the contract named him as Vaughan Williams, and Vaughan Williams he is to his colleagues.

Married with two young daughters, he lives in Southall London. Mr Williams who took part in the first production of the Benjamin Britten opera 'Peter Grimes' was in the chorus in the film 'The Tales of Hoffmann'. Mr Williams's ambition is to be a

concert singer- an ambition likely to be realised soon. He was educated at T'yr Graig and Newbridge Grammar school

I do not know who put this into the paper but it did me no harm.

18. Home Matters

I must now go back to our home. Romaine has grown now to school age so they were now both at school. Romaine was at the Western Rd infants and Janet at Manor House School in Norwood Green. Eventually Janet ended her education at Haberdashers Aske's school in Acton, and Romaine finished her education at Churston College Norwood Green.

Let us for a moment go back to when Romaine was quite young. We had put her to bed and we settled down in the sitting room to have a peaceful hour when we heard from upstairs a gentle 'Dad I can hear some water dripping'. From downstairs I say 'O go to sleep'. From upstairs 'but Dad there is a drip of water'. I go upstairs and of course I find there is a hole in the cold water tank. My quiet evening was over. That must have been an evening I had off from the theatre. We obviously had to get a plumber in to do the job with money we could ill afford. This is a problem when one buys an old house, or anything else old for that matter. One has to take the good with the bad.

We were progressing satisfactorily with our lives, we were short of money but we were happy and very much in love. Of course our children were the icing on the cake. We were working most of the time, so there was very little time to explore the town we were living in.

Southall itself was a fairly large town but it appeared to be cut into two towns by the railway line through the middle running from east to west. So one half lay to the north carrying the main road, while to the south the road meandered out into the country with the Grand Union canal to add to its beauty. This is where we used to walk and enjoy the pleasures of the countryside. We could also enjoy walks in Cranford bluebell woods but of course they are now covered with tarmac of the M4 and Parkway access to Heathrow Airport

Life went on and time went by but we were enjoying life to the full. Win and I were madly in love but we still had one or two problems. Like the day when Win said to me that she had come across while dusting, some little holes in the floorboards. This of course meant the dreaded woodworm. We sat down to consider the problem. We did not have enough money to pay someone to do it, so we asked the lending company if we could borrow the money. A gentleman came along to talk with us and to look at the property. His report was, before we could get the loan we would have to do more work which would cost more than the original request asked for. This would have placed us in a worst position than before we started. Win told him what he could do with his money. That meant we had to roll our sleeves up and do the job ourselves. We did not mess about with half measures, we went right to basics. You never saw such a mess.

It was up with the floorboards and the joists for the whole of the ground floor. It was providential that the worms were still feeding on the ground floor and nothing was found upstairs. The only room we had to live in was the kitchen which had a solid floor. We had floorboards and joists leaning against the walls for some time after we had treated them with the mixture required and left them to dry. The next job was putting it all back together again and I think the kids enjoyed themselves more than we did. But the job turned out to be a success anyway.

19. All Good Things

Work at the 'Wells' was still going very well. It was as always very enjoyable for me but 1957 as it turned out was a bad year for the company. As I have said there were rumours and a few grumbles within the company. The singers were getting restless. It had come to the point when I had to make up my mind what I should do. So after lengthy discussion with my lovely wife we both felt that a change should be made. I put into the office my resignation and was told it was the best thing for me to do. I did not understand what was meant by that statement, after twelve years of good work without a complaint of any sort. It upset me a little but I was to find out within a few months why.

I had by now started to work for the B.B.C, each job being on a separate contract basis. I was very pleased with the way things were moving along, but I was not earning quite enough to keep us going, so I resorted to subsidising my wages by taking up another insurance agency. This worked very well. Win insisted that she helped me by coming out with me collecting and I worked on getting new business. It worked so well that we bought two bicycles to help us get around quicker. Again I am going too quickly in my story.

The truth about The Sadlers Wells Opera did resolve itself and the statement that was made to me now seemed more sensible. The S.W.O. apparently ceased to exist and I have never heard of them since. I do believe that the S.W.O became the E.N.O, or to give it's proper name The English National Opera. Their home is the Coliseum Theatre in London.

This to me is very sad. After all the work, that this small company to which I belonged to for twelve years, had to be taken off the entertainment list. The reason for this I cannot say as I was never told, and as far as I know it was never made public knowledge. The S.W. theatre is still in existence but has been refurbished and I think it has reverted back to being a music hall and entertainment centre as it was when it first saw the light of day.

I was sorry to give up the opera stage after having performed in approximately 50 operas at a guess, but the time had come to move on. Television was beckoning me and that is completely different to theatre work. Television was in its infancy when I worked at it. I am not going to try to explain the ins and outs of putting a programme together in those far off days, but it certainly did not do the nerves any good and as a general rule, one had to be right first time.

There was no such thing as a recorded programme, so if one made a mistake the public knew about it. I spent quite a few Christmases in a television studio rather than enjoying myself at home with Win and the children. That is why there is no tape available with me on it.

I enjoyed it though. I was doing all sorts of programmes now from opera to comedy, and there were more shows like that in the 50's and 60's than what there are today. Entertainment was the name of the game in those far off days, not like the weird programmes they put on today. My work for the B.B.C. also entailed Radio performances, so by today I cannot remember which was for television and which was for radio. So between the B.B.C. and my insurance work I was kept quite busy. Win was also busy in her job as secretary to one of the managers in 'Ripolin Paints'. But we could never earn much money as jobs were very poorly paid.

20. Family & New Friends

We were beginning to get the house in pretty good shape by now and we had bought our first car. This was in 1957. It took four attempts before I passed my driving test. It was an old banger, a grey Standard Ten (Registration No. 263 CHX). I learned to drive the hard way. I remember on one occasion the engine started to overheat and me not knowing a thing about cars or engines took the radiator cap off to help cool it. But as I did, the water that was left shot about four feet into the air. How I sorted it out I cannot remember but I had learned my first lesson.



There was very little traffic on the roads then and Romayne who was quite young at the time used to say (if there were no other vehicles in sight) 'Oh Dad we are lost, we are lost Dad'. There were no 'M' roads about then so it took us quite a long time to get to South Wales to visit our in-laws.

At about this time my parents were talking about moving up to Southall to be nearer to us as Dad by now had retired. But Wins parents did not want to move as her Dad was still working and her mothers family were still living in the area.

So in January 1959 my parents moved to Southall. They bought a house which was in the street next to us so that we could be as close as possible to keep an eye on them. We had already joined our local church which was called St Johns and of course before very long I was asked to join the choir, which I did and I enjoyed singing church music for a change. My parents joined the local Baptist Church, the service being the one they were more used to. We soon settled in this church and got to know many more friends which made us feel that we were now part of the community. The church which we attended had a very large congregation so therefore had quite a number of other activities, which if we were available joined in with.

My work in the singing department was going quite well. The B.B.C. were offering me quite a bit of work for which I was most thankful. To change the mood slightly they gave me work in a play called 'Quillow and the Giant'. What it was all about I cannot remember, but I do remember the principal part was played by Cardew Robinson and it was a change to my usual jobs at singing. I also played comedy with Benny Hill, but the most important programme for me was 'Music For You' conducted by Eric Robinson. I did every performance of that programme. It lasted quite a long time and Winifred said that it was that show that saved our lives financially.

The other big show I performed in was George Mitchell's 'Black and White' minstrel show. I worked quite some time for George until one Christmas time he asked me if I would understudy the solo bass part in one of his pantomimes. I considered it for a time but it would have taken me away from all my other work, away from Win and the children for about three months. I would be back in the same position of keeping two homes going. So we decided 'No'. I told George and he never gave me another job.

That was how 'cut throat' theatre work was in those days. I also worked with Max Jaffa and his musical quartet as one of his two bass singers in his backing group for soloists, which I enjoyed very much. We were all in evening dress, it was delightful.

The other show which I remember most vividly was Vic Oliver's Saturday night entertainment programme. It was always a winner while being performed in front of an audience. We recorded it on the previous Sunday and that was the only series of shows I ever remember being recorded but whether it was radio or television I cannot remember. It was the only show I did at the Cambridge theatre on the embankment and I remember Winifred came to a few of these recordings. I think I sang in most if not all of the recording studios and concert halls in London, among them being the recording studio's in Abbey Rd. The Shepherds Bush Empire which had been taken over by the B.B.C., Lime Grove Studio, Riverside Studio, Alexandra Palace, The new Television Centre, the new Royal Festival Hall, and of course the Royal Albert Hall.

The Shepherds Bush Empire was converted from a music hall to the Television Theatre in 1953, and in 1956 two film studios became Riverside Television studio. Alexandra Palace is or was called the Palace of the people and was first opened in 1873 as the People's Palace. Sixteen days later it burned down and it took two years to rebuild. The doors opened again in 1875. Its main hall held about 14,000 people and it also contained room for other activities. In 1935 the B.B.C. leased the eastern part of the building from which the first public television transmissions were made in 1936, but after 1956 it was used exclusively for the news broadcasts. On the 10th July 1980 half of the Palace was burnt again but the area occupied by the B.B.C. was not damaged. Again it was rebuilt and opened again on the 17th March 1988.

The Television Centre was built in 1960 and it was in this new building that I did most of my television work. I met or worked with the top stars of that era. If anyone had suggested in the early days that Winifred and I would have achieved all this, I would not have believed them. We certainly had a very happy and eventful life in Brent Road.

While all this was going on Janet and Romaine were doing very well at school.

We changed our car about this time and were now the proud owners of the newly designed Ford Anglia (Registration No. 4550 MV), which after some time did not come up to the standard I had hoped for. It kept on overheating.

The house was a very happy house. Janet and Romaine were now young ladies and were gathering many friends around them. I think we spent at least half of our married life in that house. Its walls echoed with the joy and laughter of these young people as they were continually visiting us which we appreciated very much. We were now settled members of the church, and of course knowing that I was a singer I was asked to join the choir. I could not say no, so there was I still singing. Janet joined the choir in 1961 in the alto line. She was joined a couple of years later by Winifred and Romaine. So there we were sitting in the choir stalls taking part in the service which we enjoyed very much. Time passes very quickly, or it seems so and daily routine goes on much as usual.



So it was with me until one day there began a little misplaced feeling between the lady who was choir mistress and either the church itself, or the choir in particular. This obviously caused a bit of a problem for the choir mistress, so she promptly resigned. The choir therefore had no conductor or elementary musical instructor.

Whether the church advertised for a new leader I know not, but I was later asked if I would take on the job being the only one in the choir who knew anything about music, so they said. This I could not believe. I had conversations with the resident Vicar.

He was quite pleased to give me the opportunity to help in this way if I could. So I went back to the choir and said I would give it a try. Win and I have always attended

church services when at all possible, but it was only now as we became resident in Southall that we were able to join and become members of St John's on a permanent basis, and one or two different associations in the area.

One such group was called Worldfriends. We became involved when Janet came home from school asking if we could have a foreign student to stay with us. The visiting group was made up of different nationalities so we did not know who was coming. It was intended to bring the youth of the world together, so that the next generation would make a better job of living together than my generation.

No such luck. I think that there is more hatred than ever and this is now in the new millennium. At the time in the sixties it seemed a very good idea, and to give the movement prominence there was a big meeting in London at which Prince Philip gave it his blessing. Janet was at school in Ealing at the time and said that a meeting was arranged in Ealing and would we attend. We said yes of course and that was where we put ourselves into more work.

At that meeting I was voted in as chairman of the Ealing branch of Worldfriends. This progressed very satisfactorily for quite some time and exchanges of parties occurred. Janet was the one who took part mostly because she was the elder child of our two. We took a party out to Germany, to Nurnberg to be exact, and we stayed with families and not hotels. We then had the daughter of the family later to stay with us at another time. This we did with five or six young ladies.

Romayne our second daughter also travelled with us when she was old enough, and she has just reminded me of a trip to Vienna that we did after receiving a young lad called Josef into our home. We all enjoyed that trip too. We went to the Tivoli Gardens and we also saw the famous Opera House, though I could not see the inside as it was the closed season. It was all very interesting and we were also told that the family possessed a vineyard. Of course we were invited to go and visit it. I do not remember seeing any vines but we were driven out into the country and after walking across a field, we came to some steps. After going down the steps, surprise surprise. We came to the wine cellar. I think every German has a wine or beer cellar and believe me this was no exception. The parents of Josef had already arranged this reception. There was a long table in the cellar with seating to match, and if I remember correctly there were some barrels of wine lined up against the side wall.

There was plenty of food on the table and Josef's father was dressed in his costume as 'mine host' with a serving wine glass. This glass was about four or five feet long which he rested on his shoulder and it narrowed by the time it reached his fingertip. The wine was released by taking his finger from the end of the glass.

We had a wonderful evening with plenty of food, wine and good companionship. But the wine was a little stronger than we thought. So I am sorry to say we all felt very happy, but one or two of us more than the others. Susan Tite, Romayne's friend, had to be assisted to the car and I was told by my daughter that I was happier than I should have been.

When parties visited us we reciprocated by showing them the sights of London town and surrounding district such as Windsor Castle and Hampton Court. Janet carried on corresponding with the daughter of the family she visited on our Nurnberg trip, which was in the suburb called Zirndorf. This lasted for quite some time and we all enjoyed the company of the young people as each exchange took place.



Our lives were still progressing very nicely in 94 Brent Rd and as the girls were getting older we were entering the more adult way of living. Dorothy by this time had married and had a family of her own. By now our little family were regulars at the church. I was

progressing well with the choir but we wanted more singers if possible. Janet who was as much interested in the choir as I was wrote in the Parish Magazine a Personality Spot about me which went like this,,,,,

Mr Vernon Williams our choir master was born in Llanhilleth, Monmouthshire, the only son of Mr and Mrs Trevor Williams. As a boy he was taught the violin by his father and gave his first public performance at six years old. He was educated at Newbridge Grammar school but this was not kept up very long because of bad eyesight. His Christian upbringing started as a member of the Baptist Church but was drawn to our church by Rev Moray to join the choir. Even in his own church he enjoyed being with young people and would talk to his class well over the time limit in the Sunday school. For a while after he left school he worked in insurance with his father. Even then he found that music was to hold a primary position in his life, so after being married for two years, he left me (then one year old) in the care of my grandparents and passed an audition to sing with the chorus of the Sadlers Wells Opera Company.

As soon as the war was over the company toured Germany, and of course so did he and his wife Winifred who was by now working with the Company as assistant Wardrobe Mistress. After returning to England, a home was made at 94 Brent Rd and I was brought to Southall from Llanhilleth. My father remained with the Company for 12 years and then went back to work in insurance, as well as taking up freelance work singing with the B.B.C. Having always liked the company of young people he

now enjoys his occupation of being chairman of the Ealing & District Branch of Worldfriends. This was an organisation which promoted friendship between all members of the world by home to home exchanges. In the three years that we have been members we have already given hospitality to two Swiss, one Austrian, one German. Our last visitor was a girl from Copenhagen, Denmark. The choir is another main interest since he has been made choirmaster and we hope that he will be encouraged in this work by your unfailing support.

I also put in the magazine another item under the heading....

Are YOU interested in the choir. Are you interested in the musical side of your church service ... Do you think that the way the Hymns, Chants, Responses and Anthems are sung, helps or hinders the service? If you are adversely critical there must be something wrong with the choir. There is something wrong.....our choir membership is too low. We haven't enough singers. We are trying to keep going with very young members who must be taught first before they can hold their own. This of course applies to the boys. The choir at St John's has always been a good choir but of late it has lost some of its past glory. Mr Singleton and I are trying to rebuild the choir but without your assistance we can do nothing. To all readers of the magazine I would ask if you have a son who can sing. We need singers for all parts of the choir. If you can sing come along to practice at 7, 30 p.m. on a Thursday night or speak to Mr Singleton or myself at any time. We wish to build St John's choir to worship God in great music, but without you it cannot be done..... Please come and help.

Things took quite some time to take shape. Most people that I approached about joining the choir would say 'I would if I could sing'. Then I would say to them 'You are just the person I am looking for, see you in church on Thursday evening at 7.30'. Eventually the choir reached a balance of sound that I could work with and even those people who could not sing were beginning to enjoy themselves. On many practice nights we got so enthused by the music that we were still at it after the allotted time and all were quite happy to learn. Of course the choirboys were sent home much earlier. Mr Singleton and I carried on for sometime until the choir built up a little.

We have now reached about the year 1960 and I would like to say that I was progressing with the B.B.C. and also with the insurance job I had taken on.

Winifred was enjoying her work with Ripolin Paints. We were very happy at the way events were taking place and taking trips in another car that I exchanged for the Anglia. This was now the Popular 1100. We took every opportunity to visit places we had never seen before. Both girls were doing very well at school. We were all very pleased when Janet passed her 'O' & 'A' levels at Haberdashers school, and Romaine started her schooling at Churston College Norwood Green. Janet took her 'O' level in music after driving us all mad with the continual playing of Brahms'

Academic Festival Overture which she had to study. She also practiced on the church organ on a Sunday afternoon and while doing this the vicar, the Rev Binder, asked her to stay on and play for the christenings. So she had another job to do but I am sure she received a lot of joy doing it.

The choir now had another setback, as Mr Singleton our organist resigned on the grounds of ill health. So the Church had to find another organist. The congregation was growing and more young people were joining us. Therefore the choir had more members after my gentle persuasion. It appeared that the young people who joined us had a number of skills at their fingertips, which proved quite useful in the time that lay ahead. The most valuable member was Mr Roger Pope who studied music at Keble College Oxford. Praise be, we had a new organist. So with a larger choir and a first class organist, we were able to perform for church services, more complicated musical works. Roger took the job of organist and his brother David standing by to assist when required. We were now becoming one big happy family.

Roger suggested that on certain Sunday evenings, after evening service he would play an organ recital. This turned out to be a very special event and many stayed behind to hear such beautiful classical music. The new boys were now getting better and the rest of the choir were making every effort to perfect the music of the services in the praise of GOD. Secular music was not forgotten and in the evening of every Shrove Tuesday we would do an entertainment, such as a pantomime or an imitation of a London show. This was when David would join Roger on the piano's as the accompanying music. Everything was done by the young people, even to the lighting effects and scene painting to mention just a couple of things. We were all very happy and life was very good.

As I have already stated we had a wonderful set of young people, all members of the church, and were now getting a lot older. It was good to see some of them choosing their life-long partners as did Janet, who eventually married Bill Phillips. Romaine of course being that much younger was bringing up the rear. Janet on leaving school had the opportunity of working at Hammersmith Hospital in the Bacteriology department and qualified in 1966. In the same year Romaine left school and started to work for Taylor Woodrow Construction. In 1968 she won the award of most efficient secretary in the company. Win and I were very proud of our two daughters. We were all living life to the full.

21. All Change

I was still working at the B.B.C. when a change of minister happened at the church.

I was still a member of the church council being choir master and he told me that I was no longer required as a member. My name had been removed from the list, the reason being in his estimation that I was not attending enough meetings. This meant that I had to resign as choir master because without the co-operation of the minister I could do nothing. I was obviously very upset about this and as time passed, one could see the change of attitude happening. The 'YOUNG PEOPLE' that were in the choir had now come to maturity, some leaving for pastures new. While one or two others who had found their partners in the choir had married and left the town to be nearer their places of work. Yes Southall was changing.

A factory dealing in rubber, which was very hot work, were taking in quite a number of immigrant workers. Not that I have anything against foreign people, colour, race or creed, but the change was quite obvious. The town, eventually, as was expected turned multiracial. The white residents moved out and the immigrants took over. Taking over buildings which housed their meetings, religious or otherwise, became a normal procedure and shop proprietors seemed to change overnight. It was natural therefore for jokes to be told about this town such as 'You will now require a passport before entering'. Time was passing quickly or so it seemed and the immigrants increased in number. so the attitude of the town changed. I was still working for the B.B.C and around this time a certain thing happened which I have never forgotten.

I was also doing my bit to earn some money on the insurance job and it was on a Saturday that I was away from home when a telephone call came from my fixer. The fixer was the gentleman from the B.B.C who arranged jobs for me when they became available. There were no such things as mobile telephones in those days, so Win was at home keeping her fingers crossed that I would arrive home in good time. The telephone call was for me to be at the Albert Hall at six o'clock for a rehearsal of the mighty 8th Symphony by Mahler, to be performed the next evening led by Leonard Bernstein the famous American conductor. It was a chorus job (obviously) and the chorus that was booked was the famous Leeds Festival choir. Bernstein after his rehearsal said to the B.B.C. 'I do not have enough power in the choral section, I will need another eighty singers'. Needless to say I got there on time and incidentally that job was the last job I ever did for the B.B.C. I was sorry that no more singing jobs became available. I had therefore to concentrate on my insurance job.

So begins to my mind as far as work was concerned, the worst part of my life. My voice was still good and I still did solo work in the churches. I also sung at the town hall, but life does not stand still.

All of us were getting older. That is Win, myself and the children. The children were now married and leading their own lives. That left me with the one job of earning a living. Insurance, and that was not bringing in very much to live on. So Win had this idea of me applying for a manager's job. This I did and so starts the second phase of my life. I applied for the job at the Southall office but had no chance of getting it as the son in law of the retiring manager had also applied, so the outcome was obvious. I had to wait for the next job to appear which turned out to be assistant manager at Harrow London. The date was fixed for an interview at a hotel near the office which was situated in a residential house, which surprised me. For what I remember of the meeting the lunch was fine, but I felt the underdog when it came to answering the questions asked by the representatives from head office and the manager that I was to work with. Nevertheless they all seemed to think that I was worth the effort so I became assistant manager of the Harrow district.

Southall district knew what was happening so I was removed from their books to start a new life in my new district. I had to use my car to do this job as Harrow is quite a distance from Southall and my job was basically to get new business. So after meeting the agents this I had to do. I was given a small wage and had to bump up my wages with commission to make any sort of salary. On a Thursday I had to balance the books to present to the manager. Incidentally I never did find out what the manager did.

Time as always is not on one's side. There is so much to do and so little time to do it. We found that I could not do the work properly living so far away. If an agent fell sick I would be expected to work his book for him. I did indeed have one such agent who's customers lived in the maze of streets of west London. I collected his premiums a few times when he was ill but I did not finish the round once. I refused to do it again. It was shortly after this that door to door collecting of insurance premiums was abolished. Another problem appears now. As I have mentioned, we had settled my mother and father in a residence in Southall and we were now contemplating a move so that I would be nearer my work. It would be a hard decision to make. We had lived in Brent Road for many years and it would be hard to leave it. We had also to think of my parents. We could not leave them behind. So we had a problem of finding a place big enough to house them as well as us. Win was still working for Ripolin Paint Company so that meant by moving I would shorten my journey, but Winifred's would be that much longer.

Janet and Bill were already married and were living close by in Harrow so this was a great help to us in looking for our new home. Eventually we found a large house in Hampermill Lane Oxhey. This little area of Oxhey was a suburb of the town of Watford and so could be quite handy to visit now and then. So Janet and Bill, ourselves and my parents came to the decision that it would be the best thing to sell the two houses and buy this bigger house. We would live in the upstairs area and my parents to occupy the ground floor area. My big worry though was the thought of Win driving from home to Southall each day.

We managed to get her a new car and my worries were quite unfounded. In a way we were sorry to leave Southall after so many years, but changes had come about and in the end it was inevitable that we had to move. In my work I at last realised that I had made the wrong decision by becoming a manager instead of keeping my status as an agent, but I did a little good by giving my son in law Bill a job as an agent with the company. He tired of it quite quickly and Janet took over making much more a success of it as she could fit it in around looking after our new grandson Mark.

We had a large garden attached to the house. We made good use of it by growing vegetables and landscaping the part nearest the house. Unfortunately after quite some time of living in our new environment, trouble came knocking at the door. My father suffered a stroke and was taken to Watford hospital. This indeed was a sad day for us all but worse was to follow. Soon afterwards Mother was taken ill and had to be taken to the same hospital. This was in 1975 and I think it was grief that caused this for her. So for about seven weeks it was hospital visits until the inevitable happened. They both died without knowing the fact that either had passed away. Possibly good for them but it drained Win and I of all feeling. It took us a long time to get over it but get over it we did. We soon got into the normal way of our lives.



I was working as best I could as assistant manager at the office but was finding it increasingly difficult as the manager seemed to be doing nothing but claim his wage packet at the end of the week, criticising everything I was doing. This was getting my back up and I began to think I was good for nothing. But this was not my nature to give in so I put my thinking cap on. I realised that this manager's job was not for me. Where was I to find a job that suited me and take in my age as well. I was not getting any younger. In my travels I was in Stanmore quite often and it occurred to me that I was passing the Automobile Association's office each time, not giving the building another thought. I wonder, yes I wonder if there was a job there for me. Quite a number of people I thought would be needed to take breakdown calls. After consultation with my dear wife it was decided to give it a try and see what happened.

At this point I would like to explain a certain thing that happened concerning both the Opera company and the insurance company that I had been employed by. As you

may remember I did mention that when I left The Sadlers Wells Opera, a certain amount of trouble was being talked about in the ranks but I did not find any details. Some time after it came to my knowledge that the Sadlers Wells Opera had ceased to exist and had been given the new name of The English National Opera. To me this was a shame for such a name to disappear from the pages of British entertainment. The theatre still bears the original name but has reverted back to being a music hall. Regarding the home of the new English National Opera it was apparently decided that it would be the Coliseum.

Regarding the insurance company, it was decided that all door to door calls should cease. That meant the demise of the insurance agent as we knew him and if I was still an agent I would be out of a job. So taking everything into consideration we thought I was doing the right thing.

The next day dawned and away I went to see if I could find another job to earn some money to keep the wolf from the door. With some trepidation I entered the office at the AA to find it quite empty, but after a short while a gentleman appeared and asked my requirements. After a few remarks to each other it came down to the fact that were there any jobs available. In answer he did better than just offer a job. He asked if I would like to have a look around the workplace. I was delighted with this suggestion and agreed immediately. If I remember correctly he took me upstairs to a couple of large rooms, one adjoining the other. There was in one room people with telephones, maps and everything concerned with cars and travel. Also the very important thing called the radio without which nothing would happen. In the other there were about twenty people with telephones and each one had a book of maps containing every street in the London area. Everyone in both rooms were very busy taking calls or giving instructions to someone. Of course there was a manager in each room to deal with any problems. I was given to understand that the telephonists in the second room were taking calls from members of the A.A. who had broken down, writing these details on a form which was then passed to the first room to be dealt with by radio to a patrol. Or if it was too difficult for the patrol, to contact a garage to assist. There certainly was action and plenty of it. So after taking my details he said you are now working for the A.A. Good luck.

So away I went to report my good luck to Winifred who was very pleased with the outcome of my visit. We still lived in Hampermill lane but the house was too big for just the two of us, so we were having thoughts of putting it on the market, although we were working hard on the back garden to develop the shape of it. Nevertheless it would have to wait for some time yet so that I could settle in my new job. The town of Watford was quite near and it was a delight to visit the town to see the shops and possibly have a meal out. But time waits for no man, we had to do something about the house. So we put the house on the market and hoped for the best.

Of course we realised that we would not sell the house immediately, so we carried on with our lives as usual. I can imagine how my manager at the insurance company must have felt when I told him I was leaving. He would now have to do everything

other than just sitting in the office answering the telephone. So there we have it, finishing one job to start another.

It was a job that grew on me, more as the time went by. It was a job full of interest. Some people who gave details so precise that one would think that they broke down every day and others who were so upset that they found it difficult to even speak. Win was still working at Ripolin Paints and was enjoying every minute of it, although I was very much concerned at her driving on her own to Southall and back each day. I was very relieved when she arrived home safely. I had been working at the A.A. for quite some time when a general meeting was called to talk about the general feeling of the workers toward their job, and to their safety while at work. During this meeting it was decided that a person should be appointed to check on the health of the workers, telephonists in particular, and would you believe it they appointed me. This was I presume because I had been in the medical co. So if I found anyone who was feeling a little under their best, I had the authority to tell them to go home and rest.

I had the pleasure once of telling the manager to go home because he had such a bad cold and I did not want him to spread it to the others. He went home peacefully. I enjoyed working at my new job. All this had happened around the years 1973 & 1974. This situation lasted for a considerable time while the house was on the market, but eventually a buyer did appear and a satisfactory sale was made. Now Janet our daughter and her husband Bill come into my story. They happened to have bought a house in Harrow which was close by and they invited us to live with them until suitable accommodation was found for us. They had by now had two children. Mark the eldest and Helen who was a couple of years younger. This of course was the icing on the cake. We loved those children. Well they were our grand children after all. Winifred and I were very happy. We were also still able to visit the local shopping centres like Watford, Harrow and occasionally West End London, not forgetting a visit to South Wales to see the folks across the border. Life was very good but changes were soon to follow.

It was quite unexpected but bad news always travels fast. We all were very surprised when we were told that as far as my job was concerned the office was moving to a different location. This new location was to be a place yet to be named. Here it was happening again. It was not me leaving the company, it was the company leaving me. So I did the only thing possible. I did not wait for the A.A to sack me, but applied for a transfer to the Reading office. This would be more convenient as Romaine my second daughter was living in the vicinity. She and her husband had procured a property in the shape of a farm house which they intended renovating. They also had two children, Jonathan and Kevin, who we also loved very much. Their house stood in a field and I imagine they would have some animals to make it a going concern. They already had developed a vegetable garden which was very useful and with a couple of dogs running around it was certainly a building that was lived in.

So it was that I left the Stanmore office and was accepted into the Reading office. This workplace was much smaller than Stanmore, therefore much more noisy.

Everything happened all in the one room. Not so many workers either. This is as I remember it. I could be taking calls from members one day, asking garages to take badly broken down vehicles the next. And doing my share on the radio to the patrols. It was always very busy. While all this was happening to me my darling Winifred was still working in her original job and lodging in Harrow with our daughter Janet. She travelled to Reading once or twice to see me but we did not like this arrangement at all so we started again the process of purchasing a house so that we could be together again.

The decision was made that we will purchase a house and we found what we wanted. It was in a close off the main road in a place called Winnersh, which is a suburb of Wokingham quite near to Reading. This suited me admirably but Winifred would have to give up her job. This she was delighted to do. It was a new house and we had to wait a short time while the workmen finished their work, but we were quite happy the way things had planned out. We purchased the house in Winnersh and were now living in the country in the county of Berkshire. This was quite a difference to the part of the country we had left.



22. Country Life & France

We had left behind the noise and bustle of London to the quiet and peaceful life of the countryside, of which we were going to take full advantage. It was a lovely experience to drive through the leafy lanes without another vehicle in sight and to stop at a garden centre and purchase some of the fresh food they had to offer. While all this excitement is going on time is passing by. We are getting older as each year passes and unfortunately my day of retirement will be upon me. But not yet. We will never return to the noise and bustle of London and the surrounding area, but our firstborn and her family will still be there, or so it seems, and no doubt we will be paying our visits from time to time. While I am talking of the leafy lanes and the countryside in general one must remember that as time was passing, the face of the countryside was changing rapidly. There was far more traffic on the roads than ever before. We also have a new phenomenon called the M roads. Traffic had increased at such a rate in my lifetime that the road map of the country had changed beyond recognition. When I was born very few people owned a car, but now it appeared that no one was without one, possibly two. This also applied to lorries. They have got bigger and bigger. With all this build up of traffic I can say that I remember the first bridge to be built across the Bristol Channel. Before the new road, the M4, was built we had to travel up the estuary to cross it at a little place called Over. We were then in Wales. It was a long journey for us from London but it was worth it just to see Winifred's parents. It was a blessing to us when the bridge was opened. This of course cut time off our journeys to Wales. All this and possibly a lot more happened around the year 1966. Since then the traffic has built up tremendously and the need to build another bridge became a necessity. So now there are two bridges to serve surface traffic and presumably the tunnel still serves the G.W.R. railway line which connects Newport and Bristol.

I remember that at this time I started my artistic pastime which was pencil drawing and water colour that I enjoyed immensely. I also had the privilege of living in the same street as a gentleman who in his younger days had been a teacher of geometry etc and we had great times together. He taught me a great deal in that subject. Another of my efforts was creating toy versions in wood of two Landrovers and a truck, of which at the time I was quite proud and now being played with by a younger members of my family.



At the same time we were still travelling around the countryside when time permitted to the country shops to purchase our vegetables etc and or have a meal out. Life was still very good. Win and I were still madly in love and enjoying every minute of our lives. We attended the nearest church which was in a little village called Hurst. It boasted a very small congregation but we helped in singing praises to the Lord. I also had the privilege of being asked to be a member of the Twyford Singers. As you might guess I never let a moment pass that gave me an opportunity of doing a bit of singing. We had lived in Lenham Close, Winnersh for approximately eight years when the inevitable date arrived. The date being the 31st of March 1982, the date of my retirement. I was to finish work and so draw my old age pension. O happy day. Not that I was afraid of work but now I would have more time with my darling Winifred, and to do some unpaid work as you will soon find out. We also had more time to travel. I remember going on holiday to France with Janet and Bill and of course the two children. We travelled across country in our own car and joined the family in Harrow. We were all travelling on our holiday in one car. Can you imagine one car carrying four adults, two children and necessities for two weeks holiday. It happened, we enjoyed it and arrived home safe and sound. We enjoyed the sea trip also. In fact we travelled to France quite often around this time. We got to know the passage from Portsmouth to St.Malo quite well.

Each time we had our holiday in France we stayed in a gite. It was a great arrangement as we could see how the French lived, do our own shopping and see interesting places. The first gite that we stayed in was in Normandy in a village called Buais. The year was 1979 when Helen was 6 years old.

For our second trip we travelled over the Chanel to Cherbourg and our gite was in Les Pieux. From here we were able to visit the Normandy beaches and see the Bayeux Tapestry.

For the third holiday we ventured into Brittany and found a lovely large gite in Matignon. We needed the extra space because we were having Romaine and her family joining us to make a really large family get-together. Mark also brought his friend Craig along.

There were other visits to Brittany where we enjoyed visits to Dinan, Dinard and river trips along the Rance to name but a few.

23. Herodsfoot

Colin, the husband of Romaine at that time, had procured a piece of land in a village in Cornwall named Herodsfoot and had started to build a house on it. It was a fascinating little village with a stream running through the middle of it, and, incidentally it was the only stream that I ever saw the beautiful bird the Kingfisher dive into. We liked the village very much. One had to drive down a hill to enter it no matter from which way you approach it, and in reverse one had to climb a hill to get out. There were very few houses making up the village itself and what dwelling houses there were, were cottages used as holiday homes.

The ground that was bought was intended for 3 plots. He was going to build their own house on the middle plot with the possibility of building us a house on one of the others. We were still living in Winnersh while the build was progressing and enjoying life to the full. We even had a boat for a short while which we moored on the Kennet and Avon canal and had a 20 minutes drive to reach it along the M4. I also had some drawing lessons from a neighbour and helped pass the time by cleaning windows for friends who lived on the estate. This was brought to a sudden end when Win decided that enough was enough after I fell from the ladder. After a few years in Winnersh, Win and I decided that it was time to move again and, as we were situated between our daughters, we would prefer to be close to one of them.

The house that Colin was building was very large in comparison to other houses in the village and had a peculiar shape to it in relation to the other houses. Viewed from the front it was a two storey building but from the rear it had three levels. This of course was caused by the contour of the land it was built on. It was and of course still is a very large house. |



During the build, the family, Romaine, Colin, children Jonathan & Kevin lived in a portacabin on the site. And he boys were joined by another brother named Graeme.

Colin had obviously been in touch with the council and received planning permission, and as Janet and Bill seemed to be a fixture in London we thought we would like to

move near to Romaine. So we applied for planning permission to build a house next door but were refused saying that there was not enough room for another house in that part of the village. This at the time was a disappointment. We also tried a caravan but I said no to that because I was always banging my head in the doorway. Romaine, Winifred and myself went to see if there was anything available in Looe the nearest town but again I was in a bad mood and was not in a fit state to decide anything. This was very unusual for me to be in such a state of mind, because Looe was and obviously still is a beautiful seaside resort, and since that unfortunate day we have had the pleasure of visiting the place many times. So it was decided that Win and myself would take up residence in the attic of the house in Herodsfoot which by now was almost complete. We have now reached the year 1984.

In the meantime another unfinished house had been purchased in France. Colin agreed to go and live in France to complete that house. We had had some good holidays in that country so we wanted that house to be a holiday home for the family.

Colin and Romaine's two eldest were now growing up fast and were very good in riding their cycles, so Colin decided to take them to France to do some racing. We all liked the idea so off we all went to France to see the racing, and also to work on the house we had purchased there. We were there quite some time. How long it took us to complete the work on the French house I cannot remember. But it was long enough for us to get to know a little of the French and their ways. I remember we were invited to one of the parties that was arranged by these good people and believe me a good time was had by all, with most of us being a bit worse for wear. We also watched, on a number of occasions, the boys riding their cycles in the racing which I must say was great fun. We enjoyed our stay but for Win and myself it was time to return to England and to start some work on the house in Herodsfoot, which had now been called Brewlyf (Celtic for Grindstone). So return we did to live in the attic while working on the rest of the house. It seemed strange to live in a house without a front door or it seemed so, being so high up in the building. How we managed without furniture at this time I cannot remember, but manage we did while Colin and his workmates modified the cellar to make a flat for Win and myself. This in itself was going to take some time.

We at this time knew no one in this beautiful village, but there is one name that comes readily to mind and whose name I will mention, and that is Alan Sichel. I mention Alan at this point because he comes into my tale a little further on. He lived on the other side of the stream and owned a number of ducks who every morning



came waddling across our newly developed lawn to enjoy their breakfast outside our back door. By now Colin and his workmates had finished the basement flat that Win and I were occupying and the house and gardens looked beautiful. This was all very well and nice to look at but it gave us more work to do.

Digging and weeding the front garden and tending to the vegetables. The grass on the back garden had to be shown the lawn mower quite frequently besides looking after the flower beds and of course we must not forget the birds that were always a joy to watch.

Initially Jonathan went with Colin to France to help with the work, and one by one the other two boys followed. Kevin found a job in a restaurant but Graeme was still of school age so he had to attend a French school for a while.

This meant that this large four bedroomed house in Cornwall was gradually being emptied of its occupants. Win and I had been working hard at doing the finishing touches and joinery to Brewlyf while some of Colin's colleagues were converting the basement into a lovely self contained flat for us.

With the main house now finished we helped when Romaine looked after Colin's elderly aunts. Part of Romaine's work experience had been to work as a nursing auxiliary. These aunts had been residents in Cornwall for many years and lived together. They were now in their eighties and were not able to look after themselves any more, so Romaine decided that they would come and live in Brewlyf so that she could take care of them.

By this time Romaine had progressed to being a medical secretary at the local surgery and it was suggested that she took a course being held in St. Austell so that she could take up the post of surgery manager. She used our car for travelling which was at that time an Austin Allegro. Her college course was from 1985/1986. Of course with Romaine busy during the week Win and I sat up with the aunts from Sunday to Thursday, while Romaine took over on Friday and Saturday. Sadly the aunts died in 1989 and 1991 so we were empty again.

Having so few people living at the house did not mean that we were not busy.

We had our own little flat to decorate and there was yet another garden to landscape with enough room for a large vegetable plot to cultivate. We created a patio area outside the patio doors and a grassy area leading down to the stream. We had a large number of birds come to visit us including the previously mentioned kingfisher and some ducks which belonged to Alan who was our neighbour from across the water.



We also became members of All Saints Church in Herodsfoot which was a lovely little church perched half way up the hill. Our joining must have increased the membership by about 10% as the congregation was very small. We did not have a regular minister as the one person served several parishes in the area. We had a fund in progress for repairs which often happens in these rural

communities, so we were very involved in fundraising with various fetes and coffee mornings when Win would be in her element cooking for the masses.

We also went on coach trips with a group from Pelynt. We had great holidays with them and went as far as Folkestone, Bath & Wells, Whitby and Scotland. It was a big change to look at all the lovely scenery while someone else did the driving. We also did regular trips to Truro with Bakers buses. Of course, we must not forget that we did not lose touch with Janet and Bill still in Harrow with their children. We would travel by car mostly, but the train was very convenient, especially as we purchased an OAP railcard. Romayne was willing to take us to Liskeard station and we were met by Janet and Bill at Paddington.

As usual I took the opportunity to do more singing and joined the choir in Porthpyra. Other musical activity was that I was taken to the Proms each summer by Bill and often by Janet as well, which was a special treat. They were very good at getting me tickets for my favourite concerts and then making sure that I travelled to and from the venue safely. This happened every year until I was finally unable to travel.

24. Family Tribulations

It was roughly 1990 that Win and I were doing more joinery but this time in France. Colin had done the remaining building work and had contracted out the electrics and plastering. Some furniture had been purchased but the details had yet to be done. Janet and Bill came over on a couple of occasions and helped with the glazing of the internal doors and doing as much gardening as time allowed. We returned home hoping now that we would be able to use this house for our pleasure, but this was not to be.

In 1993 it was found that Win was having difficulty in walking. It was discovered that she needed a hip replacement, so one was arranged to take place in Exeter. We used Exeter because the waiting list was shorter, but of course it meant a much longer journey for visiting. Eventually all was well and she was discharged but this was to be followed by the news that her brother-in-law had been admitted to hospital where he died. This meant that her sister Lillian was now left alone in Abertillery and was also badly affected by arthritis. It was to everyone's amazement that in 1994 she invited herself for a visit to Brewlyf and then decided to take up residence where the aunts once lived.

We all drifted along together but with one notable absence – Colin. He seemed to be totally at home in France and refused to move even though we said that we wanted it vacated so that visitors could use it. He even considered living in the garage and constructing a mezzanine as a bedroom. This caused a considerable amount of friction among the family, especially Romaine. We also discovered that Romaine had been seeing quite a lot of Alan so it was easy to guess what was to come.

Sure enough Romaine divorced Colin for unreasonable behaviour but it meant that we were yet again to be uprooted out of our home. Both Brewlyf and the French house had to be sold to meet the settlement arrangement of the divorce.

We started searching the area looking for another property where we could settle down once again. Nothing filled the bill until we came across a builder who was building on the outskirts of Liskeard

We visited the area and liked the look of it so we decided to buy a 2 bed semi-detached house. Ours was one of the first to be completed and Lillian decided to buy the adjoining house. Lillian moved in first and we moved in 1997. The family rallied around to take our belongings from Herodsfoot to Liskeard which must have been a distance of about 8 miles.

So here we were in another new build without the usual finishing to do, but we did have another garden to landscape.

This one was more difficult than the others as it was on quite a steep slope and had to be laid out on terraces. It was hard work especially as we were both in our 70's. If it was not done properly then we could find our garden disappearing into the garden below us. Living next to Lillian must have been the worst thing that we ever decided to do because it was not long before we were doing her garden too. It ended up with us being at her beck and call. She demanded to be taken shopping, pushed herself onto our coach trips and generally made herself a nuisance. I was frequently angry with the situation but I had to hold my tongue. Following Romaine's divorce, Alan sold his property in Herodsfoot and they set up home in a bungalow in Liskeard. It was very close to the surgery so she was able to walk to and from work. Later they decided to get married, which they did very quietly at the local Registry Office, with only a couple of local shoppers as witnesses. The first clue that the family had was when they invited everyone to a party at their place and then made an announcement. Of course we were all very surprised but very happy for them.

Win still kept herself busy in the kitchen cooking for the church and neighbours as the houses became occupied. The car was having more use as the church was now a greater distance away, but our neighbour Steve was very happy to service the car for the cost of a sponge cake.

25. Years to Remember

In 2000 we were delighted with the birth of our 2nd great grandchild, Owain. The first, Valerie, who was born in 1997 and lives in France. The other great grandchildren followed in rapid succession and we now have 12, not including the step great grandchildren.

It was the winter/spring season following the birth of Helen's daughter, Rebecca. We were visiting London when we found out that Bill had managed to get some tickets for a rugby match at the Millennium stadium in Cardiff. I had never seen this new stadium so I was delighted to be asked to go. Win did not want to go to a rugby match so on our way down the M4 we dropped her off at Granddaughter Helen's house and she had a lovely day playing with Rebecca. We continued our journey to Wales and saw the match. Bill and Janet were very patient with me and walked slowly around all my favourite places – the Civic Centre, the Museum and the Castle. It had been many years since I had seen the city and it was still as beautiful as I remembered it. The stadium was also a tremendous sight. I was totally amazed after the match as I stood on an upper level and watched all those thousands of people swarming out of the gates looking just like a colony of ants. I always wonder why all these people can walk together happily chatting after a match when there is so much violence connected to the game of soccer. We collected Win on the way home who had had an equally good time with the baby.

We have now reached approximately 2001 and Win and I were shopping in Liskeard when I noticed that I was only seeing half a picture from my good eye. We were rather puzzled by this but Win suggested that I call in to the local opticians to let them check it out. They diagnosed a detached retina and sent me immediately to the Royal Eye Infirmary in Plymouth. When reaching there I was sent straight to surgery where it was stitched back into place. All this happened so quickly but without it I may have gone blind as my vision in the other eye in almost non-existent.

This scare with my vision prompted Win to do more driving as she had done very little over the last few years.

The next year in 2002 was our Diamond Wedding Anniversary having married on April 9th 1942. There was no big party but we did renew our vows in the church at Herodsfoot to mark the occasion. Unfortunately Janet and Bill could not come but Romaine and Alan were able to be there with us on the day.



During our time at Peppers Park we continued to enjoy trips to the surrounding countryside, especially Looe. There we discovered a lovely walk above the town called Hannafore. We were able to park our car there, go for a walk and then finish with a cup of tea at the cafe on the front. We were thoroughly enjoying our life in Cornwall until that fateful day in July 2003.

26. Tragedy

Win had a stroke on July 22nd 2003 at 7.30am the day after her 81st birthday. Vernon had gone downstairs to make their usual morning cup of tea. Win had been out of bed to go to the bathroom when he heard a crash upstairs. He rushed upstairs to find Win on the floor. He called 999 and also called Romaine. Win was taken to Derriford hospital. From this point onwards Vernon's life was turned upside down and he never really recovered. It is for this reason that the latter part of this writing has been done by members of his family.

Win was treated for the results of the stroke and was found to be paralysed all down her left side. She was not able to go home as she was dependent on help. She was found a place at Beech Lawn Nursing and Residential Home in Liskeard. Vernon was very depressed during her stay in hospital and found that looking after himself was extremely difficult, especially as he had a tremor in his hands. He was in danger of scalding himself even making a cup of tea.

The matron at Beech Lawn offered Vernon a room in the upstairs residential section of the house. So he moved in and spent his time sitting next to Win every day and helping her as much as possible. The family visited as often as possible, with Janet and Bill making use of the house at Peppers park. Fortunately Romaine still lived close by and was able to look in more frequently. This continued until April 24th 2004 when Win died at 5.00am.

Vernon now totally fell apart. He had lost the love of his life after they had been together for over 60 years.

He wrote at this sad time...

I am absolutely devastated to say that my dear Winifred passed away on the 24th of April. She is now in the arms of our loving Lord God waiting for me to join her, because nothing can separate us from the love which is ours. I have a wonderful family and I am sure that their love will help me survive until it is time for me to join my darling again. At this moment I would like to write a few words that gave me a little comfort. Words that were written by Canon Henry Scott Holland, and the words come as it were from Winifred to me...

Death is nothing at all, I have only slipped into the other room, I am I, and you are you. Whatever we were to each other, that we still are. Call me by my old familiar name, Speak to me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference in your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, Pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effect, without a ghost of a shadow on it.

Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was, there is absolutely unbroken continuity. Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight. I am just waiting for you in an interval, very near, just around the corner. All is well...

27. The Cotswolds

The family continued to visit as much as possible while making use of the house. A car was still kept at the house and Bill would take Vernon for a drive when he was



able to visit. Vernon still visited London making more use of the train as he was by now unable to drive. Vernon was also finding walking more difficult as his arthritis was getting worse. First Great Western trains were very helpful in assisting disabled passengers, so we enlisted their help when Vernon travelled to London. Romaine took him to the train at Liskeard and Janet & Bill met him at Paddington. He was treated to a first class ticket which gave him extra seating space and he was also served with refreshments by the attendants.

He continued to go to the Proms again using the disabled facilities and this was something that he was able to really enjoy.

While Vernon lived at Beech Lawn he was admitted to Derriford hospital to have a hip replacement. Both his hips and both his knees were in a bad way. So the process was started to make his movement improve. He was delighted with the finished product, but of course his other joints still caused problems.

A devastating event took place one time when Vernon was thought to be mentally ill, but was in fact being over-medicated with pain killers and anti-depressants. These made his mind temporarily confused. The home could not cope with this and with the advice of a psychiatric social worker he was moved to Bodmin Psychiatric Hospital.

This was terrible for Vernon as he mixed with elderly people who were suffering from dementia and did not know what they were doing. By the time Vernon arrived the condition of being over medicated was gradually wearing off. But Janet and Romaine had spent time clearing his room at the home as they thought it was a permanent state. After a few days Vernon was back to normal but was very upset at seeing other people in their confused state. Vernon was always an emotional person and this affected him greatly. He was now being transferred back to the home and his room had to be reinstated.

In January 2007 Romaine and Alan eventually decided to move to France. With the three boys, their wives and grandchildren all now in that country it was the natural thing for them to do.

Janet and Bill continued to visit Vernon in Cornwall for weekends staying at the house. All the time sorting out Win's belongings and preserving the items that Vernon still wanted. After a while the burden fell increasingly on Bill's shoulders as Janet's health deteriorated. Her walking became increasingly painful as the inherited traits of arthritis took its toll.

It became increasingly obvious that Cornwall was too far away for the family to be involved in Vernon's care and also that Beechlawns did not have many mobile residents who would be able to provide him with any company. It was therefore agreed that a suitable home be sought nearer to family members. Any care facilities in the London area near to Janet and Bill would inevitably be far too expensive, so the search area was confined to the area around the grandchildren, which was mainly Wiltshire. A great deal of research was done in order to find a suitable place and a list of the top three contenders was made. Vernon made a trip up from Cornwall and was given a tour of those homes so that he was able to have some input into the choice of where he would be living for the rest of his life

He expressed a preference for Watermoor which was the place we visited in Cirencester. The facilities were excellent and the surrounding Cotswold countryside looked ideal for taking him out on excursions.

And so it was, that we were about to ask about the availability of rooms, when Janet had a telephone call to say that a room was available and would Vernon like to take it. Of course we said yes but there was now only a few days in which we had to move Vernon and his belongings from Cornwall to Gloucestershire.

The next weekend was Easter 2008 when the whole family rallied around to get Vernon moved.

Grandson Mark took his Range Rover and brought back Vernon with as much luggage as he could carry. Janet and Bill drove their car from London to Granddaughter Helen's house and both Bill and Michael (Helen's husband) drove down in Michael's van.

The idea was for Michael to load up the van while Bill put the rest of the luggage in the car which was still parked in the driveway of the house in Peppers Park.

And so it was that the convoy returning to Cirencester consisted of three drivers in three cars bringing Vernon and all his belongings to his new home.

It was unfortunate that the chosen day was the Bank Holiday Monday as they all got stuck in holiday traffic and despite all drivers taking different routes, they all arrived at very similar times. Janet (having recently had a hip replacement) and Helen remained at Watermoor with the two girls and kept in touch with the convoy by means of text messages.

It was not possible to arrange the room properly on that day as time was getting late and everyone was tired. But things were put in order after a few more visits. Janet and Bill set up a regular weekly visit as the distance was now more manageable, but Helen was kind enough to offer to be the person on call as her journey was now only about twenty minutes from Swindon.

Vernon now settled into a new routine.

He found that the food was excellent and that he was also able to enjoy the fresh air by walking around the well kept gardens which were flat in contrast to those in Cornwall. During their visits, Janet and Bill took him for a ride in the car and he enjoyed stopping for a cup of tea and a cake. One of his favourite places was the lovely village of Bibury which had a tea shop attached to the trout farm. Of course, in his usual chatty manner he soon became friends with the staff who gave him little extras on his plate.

Bill continued to provide him with his computer and various electrical gadgets for his amusement although the impetus for using them had diminished when Win died. He had lost interest in this writing and was unable to remember the sequence of events that had happened in his life.

He also enjoyed the visit to the railway museum in Swindon which brought back many memories of past railway journeys.

Gradually Vernon's joints continued to limit his walking abilities so it was decided to continue with the progressive replacement of those parts. It was considered by the doctor that his right knee was next in order of deterioration so he was put on the waiting list at Cheltenham General Hospital for the operation. He was eventually admitted and Janet lodged with Helen for a few days so that she could visit him on the ward. The new knee remained stiff but it gave him more mobility than the original. He made great efforts to walk into Cirencester town and managing to get as far as the tea shop but made the return journey in the wheelchair.

Life continued at Watermoor with both family and staff encouraging Vernon to get outside as much as possible to exercise as it was noticed that his ankles would swell if he remained seated for too long.

The winter of 2009/10 was very cold and it was recommended that all residents remained inside for fear of slipping on the ice. Despite walking the corridors, Vernons legs continued to swell.

On March 31st 2010 it was Vernon's 90th birthday and they arranged a dinner so that all could celebrate the event together. We found a suitable hotel and booked the date and as many family who could attend arrived for dinner. Janet and Bill arrived together with Romayne and Alan. Their children and families Helen, Michael, Rebecca, Abigail, Mark, Helen, Owain, Isobel, Dorothy, Lynda, Stella, Jonathan, Natacha, Jason and Malcolm were also in attendance. Unfortunately neither Kevin or Graeme and their families could attend. We had a good time together but Vernon did not seem his usual jolly self.

Epilogue

Romayne's family had arranged a surprise party for her 60th birthday which was on April 23rd of that year. Mark and family were unable to go but Helen and family and Janet and Bill were all arranging the trip over to France. Watermoor had been given Mark's telephone number in case of emergencies as the rest of the family would be out of the country.

Those of us who were travelling had arranged to meet near Portsmouth on the Friday afternoon and sail together overnight. However, on the Thursday afternoon Mark had a phone call to say that Vernon had been taken into hospital and was finding breathing difficult. Friday morning saw Janet and Bill drive over to Cheltenham having collected a set of keys from Helen in case of an overnight stay. Vernon did not look good as the fluid collecting in his body had collected also around his lungs.

Mark and Janet were with him at 2.30am on Saturday 24th April 2010 when he passed away.

It was another sad birthday for Romayne as our Mother also died on April 24th but six years earlier.

As a family we must express our gratitude to all the staff at Watermoor, especially Judy and Michael, for the care that was extended to Vernon during his stay. Towards the end he was not his usual cheery self but he was encouraged and helped with the utmost patience. Thank you all.

And so ended the life of a devoted husband, a loving father and constant friend. He had lived life to the full. Living from the end of the first world war and through many changes in life including the electronic revolution.

He will be sadly missed.

The family would like to thank Milton Edwards for all his hard work in editing
Vernon's story for this publication.

milton_edwards@hotmail.com