

ALDERMASTON – A MEMOIR

The Hinds Head

I lived in Aldermaston at The Hinds Head from 1954 – 1963 and grew up there from the ages of 5 – 14 years. So it made a great impression on me. When we first arrived, the pub was covered in ivy and this was removed and the front doors reorganised. Inside, the main bar was originally divided into two with a Saloon and a Smoking Room. These two were knocked together to form what is the main bar now. The entrance hall had a Scottish baronial feel to it with dark wooden floors, an old settle and coat stand and deers' heads with antlers on the wall. There was a sweeping staircase with dark red carpet and brass stair rods to the upstairs meeting room which we always called the Club Room. My mother didn't like the stags heads and had them taken down. We played with them in the garden, charging each other, until they were taken away!

The cellar was always a bit scary to us – it flooded every winter. Huge wooden barrels of beer were lowered into it and put onto trestles. My father had to "tap" them which always fascinated me. One day he had a nasty accident and fell down the steps from the main bar and cut his head badly. The village doctor came very quickly and sewed up the wound with horse hair boiled in the kitchen and after a brief rest my father went back to work.

We only took in long term residential guests so rarely had more than one person staying at a time. I remember one man who was a nuclear physicist who had decided to take holy orders instead. Most of the bedrooms were free for us to roam through – we frequently changed bedrooms just for the fun of it. A lot of the time I slept above what is now the dining room but which was then the Public Bar. I soon learned all the old "pub" songs when everyone got merry at the weekend. The bar was yellow with smoke and only my father served there – my mother stuck to the Lounge Bar. We did have some help from the village but it was difficult to take a holiday and we didn't really go away as a family until after we had left.

We believed the pub was haunted. A day or two after moving in, my parents were woken one night by footsteps which stopped outside their bedroom door. Now my father – ex Navy – was a very pragmatic man and not disposed to anything a bit airy fairy. Thinking someone had broken in he leaped out of bed and flung open the door to see nothing there (they had left the landing light on all night). Mentioning this to some locals in the bar the following day, he was told "Oh don't worry, that's just the old ghost coming to have a look at you because you are new". On another occasion, when in bed one night I heard my father go up the attic stairs to wind up the clock, which he did sometimes. The following day I asked him about it but he

said he had not been up there at all that night, so we were left feeling somewhat haunted.

Outside

Outside the pub in what is now the car park there were stables, an ostler's cottage and coach houses from the pub's coaching days. The coach houses made excellent garages which my father let out. The stables still had their mangers and stalls and were great places to play in except that in the hayloft the floors were so rotten we frequently put our legs straight through them. The ostler's cottage was full of junk – probably some of it quite collectable nowadays. I distinctly remember some old furniture such as wash stands and an Indian brass vase.

The main garden is very much as it is now except the centre ash tree has been removed. The yews are all still there – I have climbed every one! We used to climb onto the roof of the lock-up just the other side of the wall and dare each other to jump off. There was also an extensive vegetable garden, half of which was sold off during our tenancy to build the new Vicarage. We had a strange old gardener who went by the name of Kewey – he did not seem to have a first name nor a surname. He rode down from Tadley on an old bicycle two or three times a week and worked by growing all our vegetables – we ate everything in season. He had a dog who ran after him on the bike – I was scared of it. At lunch time he would undo a newspaper parcel which contained a bit of fish which he cooked over a fire of sticks. Sometimes he would have bread and cheese and raw onion. I think his second job was as grave digger up at the church. He himself was found dead under a hedge one day (not ours!) or so I was told, and we had someone else after then – Chris Chapman I think.

Our customers were either from the village or from the newly built AWRE. My mother made huge pots of soup and served sandwiches and developed quite a lunch time trade. In the evening, it was more the locals who came in. Everyone knew everyone and even the vicar was a frequent customer. At one time my father got to know Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears quite well as they came in over a few days when filming nearby. I wish I had met them! But we children were kept strictly out of the bar as the laws were very clear then about children not being allowed on licensed premises. I remember one farmer who was sometimes a bit impatient for the bar to open, and he would come and knock at the back door and was allowed to come in and wait until 10.30 but not a minute before! This was in the days before drink driving laws and one night he drove his car right into a pub on the A4 through the wall, luckily not ours. Other visitors to the back door were "gentlemen of the road" who often came through the village. They would be given a drink of milk and some bread and cheese and would then go on their way. My mother also adopted stray cats and at one count we had at least seven who came to the back garden and

were fed whatever was available. My pet was a ginger tom cat whom we sadly left behind but I can only hope he has some descendants still in the area.

The Hinds Head featured during the first Aldermaston marches, as the marchers came up through the village. We children found this very exciting and would spend hours sitting on the garden wall to watch them go past. Of course a lot of them came into the pub and my parents were very busy. Tatler came and did an article about it all and interviewed my father whose comments was that the marchers all came in "screaming for beer and sandwiches". I have tried in vain to find a copy of the magazine with this article – I do remember seeing it at the time quite distinctly but sadly no one kept a copy of it so if anyone has one do let me know!

The Freemasons used to hire The Club Room for meetings and my parents would have to light a large fire in the huge chimney in that room. No central heating in those days! There was always an air of mystery about these evenings. I'm not sure whether it was the Masons or another group, but clay pipes were smoked during the evening and we kept a supply of them in our kitchen cupboard, all mixed up with the plates saucers etc. The Club Room was a good place to play on rainy days and there was an old piano there to experiment on. Another rainy day adventure was to explore the old Brew House, which had been virtually untouched since it was last used to brew. There were huge wooden vats and old machinery, with piles of old dusty bottles. There was a ladder up to the malt house with more old machinery – I wish I had photographed it all. Obviously back in the days of the Hinds being a busy coaching inn, all beer served had been brewed on the premises. It would make an interesting project to trace the history of the stage coaches passing through – presumably en route to Basingstoke from the Bath Road.

The South Berks hunt and the Beagles often had their meets outside the Hinds Head and this was very exciting for us children. Everyone looked very smart on their horses taking their stirrup cups. I wish I had a photo of that time. The Beagles also fascinated me, especially since there were no horses and everyone had to run. I tried to join them once and only got as far as halfway across the first field.

The Village

In the 1950's the population of Aldermaston were mainly employed in agriculture and many of the cottages were "tied". These were the days before commuters and people's worlds were smaller. There was of course the vicar, the Rev Stanley Young, who lived in the Old Vicarage until the new one was built on our vegetable garden next door to The Hinds. The doctor lived halfway up The Street on the right hand side and his front door was usually open. There was a village school, and most of the children went on to the secondary modern in Burghfield, though my friend did pass her 11+ and went to the grammar school in Newbury. In the summer the children all helped with the harvest and youngsters often drove tractors.

There was a terrible accident once when a boy fell into a combine harvester – he was one of a twin and is buried in the churchyard. When we first arrived in the village the corn in the field next to us was stacked in stooks. We loved playing in the little wigwams and The Three Stooks was a popular game for everyone to play in the "Rec". I remember very well Mrs Pepys Cockerell who lived in Brook House – I think there was a fete once in her beautiful gardens. Then there was the dentist – I think he was in the Red House but that would need to be checked. Mr and Mrs Heighton ran the village shop where we could buy sweets for a farthing each. There was a hairdresser's at the top of The Street and the petrol station just beyond the Pottery. The Pottery seemed always to be open and as children we could just wander in and watch them at work. My mother started buying pots and I have continued to do so, and so have a collection spreading over 60 years. The Village Hall was an appreciated amenity. I went to the Youth Club there when I was 12 and danced the Twist. Each year there was a Candle Auction held in the hall, when Church Acre was auctioned. A nail was set in a candle and whoever was bidding when the nail fell out, got the acre for a year. My father provided beer for the proceedings, as he also did at the annual Flower Show which used to be held in the field next to the Rec, where the garden centre now is.

As children we had perhaps more freedom than our modern counterparts, and would wander around the village and surrounding countryside without our parents really knowing where we were – all we knew was that we had to be back at lunch time which was usually 3pm after the bar had closed. Fisherman's Lane was a favourite place to explore. The old cowshed is still there but now empty – it used to be full of cattle being milked and we actually used to pinch pieces of cattle cake from the sacks and dare each other to eat it! Further down the lane was the brick bridge, from which we played Pooh sticks. Before then on the right hand side was an old shepherd's hut on wheels. These are now quite collectable in the West Country where I live and can fetch up to £10,000. This one was disused and I always felt a bit creepy walking past it. Nearby was a small copse and I climbed over a fence to explore it one day. Horrifyingly I found an old iron poacher's trap in the undergrowth – lucky I did not put my foot in it. One day in that copse I found lots of dead birds and squirrels hanging from the trees so I might have had good reason to feel spooked near the hut.

Going across the fields from the back of the Hinds Head and across a lane which is now part of someone's garden, were the watercress beds and also a good area to collect marigolds and bog iris. The fields there are low lying and watery so would have been a good place for such plants. My cat often followed me on these expeditions! Of course the area is good for willows and we were aware of the cricket bat industry at Surridge's.

The Church

The church was very much a focus for me although set slightly out of the village. Presumably medieval builders were wary of flooding risks and of course the church had to be near the Manor. I sang in the church choir and every Saturday we would have choir practice in The Old Vicarage with Rev. Young, or Stanley as he was generally known. We were a bit of a ramshackle bunch and Stanley must have been very patient with us. At halftime we were served with Hot "O" which was orange squash with hot water served in what looked like Chinese tea cups. We stuck religiously to the old prayer book and sang through absolutely everything including the Litany at the appropriate time. It gave me a very good grounding in liturgical music and I still sing in concerts at Wells Cathedral. We were often asked to sing at weddings for which we were paid 2s 6d each. At Rogationtide we all piled into cars and drove round to the different farms with a van containing a harmonium which was heaved out and set on the grass to accompany us as we sang the old rogation hymns while Stanley asked for the fields to be blessed. Miss Barr played the harmonium which had to be lifted back into the van for the next location. I can't remember how many farms we went to each time - probably two or three. In the winter it was bitterly cold in the church - there was no heating. We had our woollens and overcoats on under our cassocks and surplices. There were never very many people in the congregation and it must have been a bit disheartening for Stanley. The biggest crowd was usually at Remembrance Sunday - it was of course not so long since the war had ended and there were many in the village who had served, including my father. The men would assemble outside the Hinds Head and march solemnly up through the village to the church - they seemed different from how we knew them in daily life as they slotted back into their military drill for the occasion. On Lady Day each year, which celebrates the feast of St Mary to whom the church is dedicated, the custom was for the vicar to sit on the village green all day to allow villagers to come to him and give him presents. I have a very strong image in my mind of Stanley sitting under a garden umbrella all day. There is a painting of this somewhere - I wonder if anyone in the village still has it.

There was a local legend about the village witch Maria Hale who has been written about in past accounts of Aldermaston life. The version of the story we children understood concerned her ability to change herself into a hare at will. A hunter out shooting one day caught a hare in the leg but it escaped. He later saw Maria limping through the village!! One day while I was there, a hare did run through the village and into the doctor's house (his door was often open) and out through the other side. When visiting the churchyard once some years after we had left a hare ran up the path and round to the back of the church. There were many more hares in the countryside around the village back in the 1950's and 60's - in fact the beagle

hunts regularly chased them – so what happened does not seem unlikely. However I did remember with a slight shiver that Maria had supposedly been buried in a corner of the churchyard under a pile of stones – probably to the right of the main door going in. I have since read that the northern part of churchyards back in medieval times were unconsecrated, so that idea might fit.

Revisiting the village recently I was struck more than anything else by how little has actually changed. Of course people come and go and times move on, but the essentials are still there. I used to lie in the long grass in the Rec and watch the peewits and listen to their mournful cry. Exploring Fisherman's Lane a few months ago I was gladdened to see there are still lapwing as they are now known in the fields and that the beautiful countryside surrounding the village is still a source of life.

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