

# **'A Country Childhood'**

*by Joan Whittaker*  
2007

Part of Horseheath Village Archives

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I was born Joan Marjorie Jacobs on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1926 in the farmhouse opposite the Mill House in Streetly End. My father, Bob (Robert Henry) Jacobs, was the horseman for Owen Webb at Streetly Hall and my mother, Annie, brought up 5 children – four boys, Reginald, Leslie, Douglas and Bernard, with two years between each of them, and then there was me, the youngest and the only girl. My nickname was ‘baby bean’. When I was 3 my father became very ill and, despite wonderful nursing from my mother, died in 1929 from a kidney disease, which would be easily treatable today. My mother, with the five of us, moved to Frettenham in Suffolk before moving back to Horseheath to live at Oak Cottage on the High Street. In those days it was split into 2 cottages and we lived on the left one, which was very rickety and moved in the wind. My grandfather lived there too.

Mother was a canny housekeeper, making a lot out of nothing. She would buy clothes from jumble sales then undo, wash and remake them into new clothes for us and mother could also, with bread and delicious gravy make seven of us a good meal out of 1lb sausages! I liked the bubble bits that came out of the ends of the sausage.

We all went to Horseheath Church of England School, which is now the Village Hall. My brothers and I would meet our friends at the pump opposite the school; they walked from the cottages at Limberhurst Farm along the back field past the sawpit, where the bungalow is on the A1307, then down Howards Lane to the pump. It would have been faster to walk on the main road, but too dangerous, not because of cars like nowadays but because of tramps. They would sit by the wayside with their fires burning, and once one nasty looking tramp threatened to cut off all the heads of the children as they passed by! We then walked quickly past the school house, where Miss Allen lived – she had short red hair, and wore very strange clothes and big leather sandals. She was probably just a bit eccentric, but we thought she was mad.

There were lots of distractions before and after going to school. Sometimes we would stop at the butchers owned by Mr Cole at 3 The Terrace on the High Street, which is now Haverhill Road. There was a tall chimney at the back where Mr Cole would smoke his bacon and hams, and a shed where we would peep in and see him killing the pigs.

After school we would visit the farriers, which is called The Old Forge now, owned by Ernie Ruffle and Tommy Simpkin. They had a yard at the back where the horses were shod and we would help work the bellows to heat the fire. They also owned Forge Cottage and a sawpit where ‘Danesbury’ now stands. The school, being a Church of England school, was closely associated with All Saints’ Church and every Sunday we would walk to Sunday School and a Church service; we would cross the Haverhill Road and walk across the fields and down Green Lane, past Church Farm, where gypsies were often camped with their caravans on the green, where Stocks Green now stands.

I was in the choir – I loved singing and I also loved sweets. Ronnie Stinton would visit the Kettles, who lived at Church Farm and also had a sweet stall on Cambridge Market. Ronnie would get 4oz of palm toffees, and when we were singing we put our hands out behind our backs and he would drop a toffee into them. We were often distracted from going to Church

as the Evangelists would come and play their organ in the meadow behind where Audley Way is now and we used to stay and listen to the singing and clapping and somehow not manage to get to Church.

The Salvation Army would come and play on a Sunday outside The Batson Arms and we would sit on the railings opposite to listen. Eventually we would trail on to Church or if it were too late we would go home and get into real trouble for not attending Church. The Rectory, which is now called Hartford House, was next to the Church and I would go there for my Confirmation Classes with the Vicar. At the back, where the tennis court is now, there was a maypole. Mayday was a big celebration in Horseheath - there would be a parade through the village with people in fancy dress – then the children would dance around the Maypole.

There was a special carriage that was used for the Mayday parades. I once dressed one of my brothers up as a monkey but when Ron Dockerill saw him he got scared and ran home. He thought he'd seen a real monkey.

The school teacher, Miss Heitman, taught my brother Reginald to play the violin in the 1930's.

The first council houses were built at Alington Terrace in 1937 and we moved there from the village when I was 11. Mother took in washing to earn extra money at the time, and with the help of a yolk around his neck one of the boys and myself would go back and forth to the only source of water, a tap 100 yards up the road to get 10 buckets of water as mother sometimes had 14 sheets a day to wash.

There were four more council houses built at Bakersfield next to the school and 40 people lived in them – the children had to sleep head to toe! The council let them use Bakersfield Meadow behind for their 'linen lines'. It was quite a sight to see all that washing flapping in the wind and the lines were always full with so many people living there!

The Guildhall, which was on West Wickham Road, was the social centre of the village. My mother helped to keep it clean and made coffee and sandwiches for the Whist Drives and dances held there. The water was boiled up in an old copper that my mother kept clean. Lux washing flakes were put on the floor to make it better for dancing. I was often allowed to go with her and would sit by the side of the big fireplace. There was a coalhouse at the bank that eventually (organised by my mother) got turned into a lavatory. The Hall was also used to lay dead bodies out before burial.

Jack Knight who lived up at the Railway Sidings, where Limberhurst House now stands, would come and play his concertina – or squeezebox as it was called – at the dances. There was much merriment and very enthusiastic dancing.

Horseheath is well known for the many ghosts that it has and I have my own tale to tell. I left school at fourteen, then I went into service working for Mrs Mortlock at Abington Lodge; during the war I went to Cambridge to work for the Government then after the war I worked for Mr & Mrs Haylock at Limberhurst Farm, looking after their children.

One night the Haylocks had company, and I stayed on later than usual to help with the washing up. As I was walking back home with my bike, up the hill, I saw a strange sight – a large white shape moved slowly towards me, down from the sky and flapped around me. I became frozen with fear then as it moved off. I came to and jumped on my bike and cycled home as fast as I could. I never told anyone about it as Ron Mayes, from Limberhurst Farm Cottages, was always playing tricks on us girls and I thought it might have been him and I didn't want him having the satisfaction of knowing now scared I was. BUT years later when my husband and I were driving home up the same hill, late in the evening, the car suddenly

slowed down. My husband thought that it was running out of petrol, but at the window the same shape appeared exactly the same as I had seen all those years ago – it moved slowly around the car, neither of us spoke, and once again it disappeared down Money Lane. The car started up and we arrived home. My husband said, “Did you see that?” “What was it?”, said I. We didn’t get much sleep that night.

Years passed and the Second World War was upon us and two of my brothers died in the war. My half-brother Reginald Murrell was a Grenadier Guardsman and was killed on manoeuvres in Frome, Somerset in 1940 when he was 25. He had survived the Dunkirk evacuation and had only been married to his wife Violet for 10 days. Lesley was killed in Singapore in 1942 when he was only 21. He was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Cambridgeshire regiment and I remember him going down to Shepherd Hall in Linton with Will Gurteen to join up.

I met my husband-to-be, Johnny Whittaker, at a fete in Balsham that I used to go to with my mother on our bicycles.

We were married at Horseheath Church in 1952 and we lived with my mother at Alington Terrace. She lived a good life and finally passed away peacefully at the age of 93. My husband died in 2003 and I still live here on my own, but I’m never lonely, the past is all around me. I had a wonderful childhood and I can remember it all. We may have been poor, but they were truly “happy days”.

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2007