

- CIRCLE 1 -

MEMORIES BEGIN



It has been said that everyone has two births: their natural birth and the birth of their conscious life. The birth of my conscious life came in 1940 when my ability to remember began. Some of my memories are just to do with family but many are about the world in which I have lived. There are good memories and bad. They begin in a very humble house in a very humble street which represented a way of life for millions.

The street was just one of thousands that made up an area known as the Black Country. In those days it belonged to another

world compared to today. There was a public house on the right-hand corner and the Bentley family lived in the house on the other corner. A little further down the street on the left-hand side was a terrace of six houses with an arched entry, rather like a narrow tunnel, which ran through the middle and led to the party yard* at the back. At the top of the yard were three lavatories and three wash houses which were shared between the houses. The first three houses had a cellar but water had to be fetched from one of the wash houses. The other three houses each had a tap in the kitchen but no cellar.

Our house had a tap. By the end of the 1940s the rent for a house with a tap was eleven shillings (55p) a week and the rent for a house with a cellar was eight shillings (40p) a week. In the early fifties one family was re-housed and the landlord put their house up for sale. It was snapped up for £450. Mother commented at the time that she ‘didn’t know who had bought it, but they must have wanted some oil in their lamp paying for a house like that.’

Opposite our house was a double-fronted cottage where a Mrs Jenkins lived with her two grown-up daughters. The rest of the street, on both sides, was made up of seven large factories. My elder brother Ted, younger brother Jim and I enjoyed a great deal of freedom. For example, we could go for miles in search of adventure. If we intended to go off to some distant area we were given a bag of emergency rations, usually bread and scrape† and a bottle of water, with the reminder to be sensible. We could be gone all day and Mother didn’t have to worry about us. We were told not to take risks. Now, when I look back, I realise that we were surrounded by risks and we didn’t always see them.

*A party yard was an area shared by all the houses and could not in any respect be called a garden (see circle 40). Children were not allowed to play in this area because it would annoy the neighbours.

†Scrape, familiar to most people my age, was margarine that had been put on a slice of bread and then scraped off again.

Next door to our house was a factory which made caterpillar tracks for tanks during the war. The street at that time was in a bad state. The war department would regularly send a tank so that tracks could be tested. There was no road surface and no pavement – just mud, potholes and small rocks. We never had street lights. During bad weather we would step out from the front door straight into a quagmire. After the war the factory was taken over by another company, the road was surfaced and a pavement put in. After this, by six o'clock every evening – when all the factories had closed for the day and there was no traffic – the street became our playground and we were joined by youngsters from other streets. With no houses at the bottom end of the street we could make as much noise as we wanted and disturbed no one.

Everyone in the area and beyond lived in streets made up of two-up-two-down houses and was working class, so you knew where you stood. There were the odd one or two families who thought they were a cut above the rest of us but, as Mother said: 'You can tell them a mile off. The men are full of their own importance while the women walk as if their knees have been welded together. In their primness they're old beyond their years and always look as if they've just sucked a lemon.'

I remained in the street until I married in 1955. I had lived there through a period of great change. There had been the hustle and bustle of wartime with its attendant misery, shortages, making do and pulling together. However, this was always accompanied by hope and, for the children, the certain knowledge that God was on our side and we would win the war. With the end of the war came the realisation that things would have to get worse before they could get better. And they did. By the time I left the house there had been another war, this time in Korea, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, and several skirmishes world-

wide. However, rationing had come to an end at last, ballpoint pens had been invented and we now had plastic washing-up bowls and buckets. I was led to believe that things were now back to 'normal'.

What a let-down. After all that misery we had a plastic bowl, a bucket and a biro. While the children might have been optimistic and free throughout the period, the adults had not. They had suffered twelve to fourteen years of strife, hard work and worry. For many of them what should have been the best years of their lives had gone. These days, when I hear people going on about the grim state of the world we live in today, I remind them that it cannot possibly be worse than the one I was born into.

- CIRCLE 2 -

BURGHLEY HOUSE



It was in the billiard room at Burghley House in Lincolnshire that the idea for the tapestry began. It was 17 May 2006 and I was on an outing for the day with my friend Betty. In the billiard room other people were looking at the furnishings and paintings, but my eyes were drawn to the ceiling and stayed there. It was designed with an intricate plasterwork pattern of interlocking circles. I knew I could create something using its outline in needlework but what could I possibly make? The walls of my home were already crowded with

various samplers and floral scenes and I had no room for any more cushions.

The following day, while drinking my early morning cup of tea at the table in my sitting room, an idea began to form in my mind. What about a table cover? I imagined this as something that would fit only the top of the table without overhanging on any side. The subject would have to be interesting and something that one could associate with circles. The idea that was more prominent than any other in my mind was ‘the circles of life’; and so it was decided. I would sew circles, containing details of my life. Then I would be able to sit every morning and contemplate what I had lived through.

I have been a needlewoman from childhood and eventually became capable of doing everything from delicate needlework to re-upholstering a sofa. To create the circles the basis of the pattern consists of ovals and squares which took 36,992 stitches to form; only then could the serious work begin.

Each circle is three and three eighths of an inch in diameter and the whole piece measures 44 inches by sixteen. I started in the middle, with the circle about Parks (Circle 37) and then completed the first set of circles that surround this. I carried on like this until the circle on the Lord of the Rings (Circle 35), which I consider to be one of the best. Then I began completing circles first to the left and then to the right. It all became something of an obsession. During this time, apart from looking after myself and my home, I was also studying for a history degree, writing essays and sitting exams. By the time I finished this piece of work on 8 October 2007 I had had 63 years of immense pleasure from threading a needle, but nothing gave me the satisfaction that I found in doing this.

In the tapestry there are 73 circles representing people, places and events in my lifetime, taken from between January

1940 and December 2006. The four corners serve as reminders of my education and my pride in being British. Around the edges of the tapestry you will find 22 half-circles which represent people I simply would not like to forget. Two are memorials to friends I have lost. One shows the men who tramped to work every day to the factories in the street. Others remind me of friends from my earlier years. Some are representative of my friends at Leek Wootton. All of these people are remembered with pleasure. And there is one, the girl on the wall, who has become essential.

‘The girl on the wall’ refers to a black-and-white photograph of me taken at school when I was eleven. A few years ago I produced an enlarged version of this picture in needlework, and this now hangs in my living room. I can remember exactly what the girl was thinking when the photo was taken, and know just what made her happy and what made her sad.

She had always been part of my life but since the first day of January 2000, the day I decided to think more about the things that matter to her, she has given my life balance and a reason to be kinder to myself. Having lived most of my life for others, at the beginning of the new millennium, at the age of 63, I decided to live more for myself.

In giving consideration to her I am finally putting myself first, and she makes it easier to do things for me rather than always doing things for other people. Ours is a relationship with tremendous advantages: it is impossible to talk about her behind her back. Not only is she the sort of friend I can berate to her face without fear of offence, but I can also overcome my feelings of regret at a frivolous yet expensive purchase by deciding that I’m buying it for the girl on the wall. Special treats do us the world of good and even an occasional guilt-laden, toffee-flavoured ice cream can be eaten without remorse,

- THE GIRL ON THE WALL -

because I am eating it for her. We have our good days and our bad days but, given a nice cup of tea, we can cope with anything.



HAWKERS, DEALERS AND PEDDLERS



Handcarts and horse-drawn carts were still an important method of selling goods when I was a child. In fact handcarts had many uses. A man in the lane owned two which he kept by the front of his house and rented out to those who needed them. They were used by people who were flitting (moving from one set of rooms to another) or those moving to a new house. Both of these might involve several journeys and I would imagine that the charge for

these would have depended on how long you needed them for.

Periodically, a man would come to sharpen knives and scissors using a foot-controlled, battery-driven grindstone. This would be mounted on a small handcart together with other tools, and I believe he did small repairs and other jobs with these tools which the layman was incapable of doing.

While everyone relied on coal for heating the home many, including Mom, also used it for cooking and baking. There were several coal merchants and they did varying degrees of trade in summer and winter. One of them still used a heavy horse-drawn cart for his deliveries; the horse was the most docile of creatures who, while the men ran up and down the entry to the yard doing their work, would stand unmoving while we made a fuss of him. When the work was finished one of the men would reach into a paper bag on the cart, tell us to stand back, and then hold whatever was in his hand to the horse's mouth. As the horse started munching, they would pull away.

The fish man came round with his handcart on a regular basis. On the cart were three or four enormous slabs of ice on which would be displayed pieces of fish. In the warm weather you could smell him both coming and long after he had gone because of the drips from his cart as he arrived, the puddle that he left in the road and the drips as he left.

The salt man also used a handcart in which he carried very large blocks of salt. Using a large knife, which was similar to a small machete, he would chop a chunk from one of the blocks and then, by guesswork, decide what it was worth and sell it to you. Having made your purchase you would take it home and, using a grater, reduce it to a usable condiment. He would come round every three or four months and on one of these visits Mom decided to buy some salt from him. On this occasion he had much difficulty breaking a chunk from the block and could

only do so in the end by using a saw. Even then it was not an easy task. At this point Mom should have given some consideration as to why he had thought it necessary to bring a saw with him, but she didn't. Having got the salt home I was given the task of grating it but, no matter how hard I tried, I had no effect on it. It was the same for Mom. She then decided that the rogue must have kept the main block somewhere damp and it had dried like concrete. The next time she heard his cry of 'salt', Mom was ready for him and, after much deliberation and threat, she got her money back.

The pig man arrived on a horse-drawn trap to collect everybody's waste food to be used as pig swill. He would be seated quite high at the front and behind him were dustbins without lids for the waste collection. He was always accompanied by a cloud of flies and, in today's parlance, the smell was gross.

The rag and bone man would also do his rounds on a horse and cart, and a bundle of old rags would buy you either three clothes pegs or a balloon. The women were allowed to rummage through the rags on his cart and if they found anything that they could use he would sell it to them. Eventually he made enough money to buy a small lorry and gave up collecting rags in favour of scrap metal. He became a very rich man.

Mom was not happy with the gypsies who displayed what they had to sell in a basket hung over their arm. She didn't like them because she knew that the bits of ribbon and elastic and haberdashery items in the basket were greatly overpriced, but she felt obliged to buy from them because, if she didn't, they would give her the 'evil eye', and she had enough trouble coping with life without bringing more misfortune down on herself. She saw it as a form of terrorism on her own doorstep.