

Growing up in Rendcomb village – Helen Comrie, née James

My parents, John and Kathleen James, met at Oxford. They both had teaching jobs in different locations before marrying, and then set up their first home in a flat in the Stable block at Rendcomb.

The college was in need of more staff accommodation, and built Conigre House in the late 1930's; my parents were its first occupants, and it was my home until I went to university.

Notes on Rendcomb childhood.

My early memories are of freedom, friendship with other staff children – particularly those of the Neale and Richards families. There was very little traffic in the village – only a few cars. My father had a car which he bought from Walter Telling when he was called up for the war. Groceries and meat were delivered from Cirencester

The village shop and Post Office was run by Mrs Worcester at the bottom of the hill. Sweets could be purchased there during the war – deciding which to buy was an agonising decision. Many houses in the village had no running water, water had to be fetched from the village pump. Similarly, the loo was usually down at the bottom of the garden – probably until after the war.

The first 'school' I went to was a small private affair in the college, run by a lovely lady called 'Spriddy', who was employed as a nanny by the Headmaster (D W Lee-Browne) for his daughter Hermione (and son Martin)

I then went to North Cerney Village School during the mid 1940's, when I was about eight.

We had to run down the Slippery Path through the trees and up to the main road to catch the Cheltenham to Cirencester service bus. If there wasn't room on the bus coming home we walked from North Cerney to Rendcomb across the fields (beside the river, then up the Cirencester drive). It was a small school of three classes – I started in the middle class, which was run by Mrs Sykes, and then into the top class with Mr Sykes – the Headmaster. This class had some quite big boys aged 12 or more who I think spent some time gardening for Mr Sykes. I don't know at what age they left school. I remember being kept in at one break because I didn't know my catechism.

We were terrorised by one parent who felt we were mean to her son. When the shout went up 'Mrs S is coming' we rushed to hide in the toilets, which were evil smelling buckets, with wooden seats.

There were separate playgrounds for boys and girls, and games on the field next to the main road; lunch was in the Village Hall.

Another village school activity was potato picking for local farms; we were taken to and from the potato fields in trucks on the back of tractors; also collecting rose hips in the autumn for 3d a pound – about one penny in modern currency – some families collected a whole sackfull in a weekend.

My mother was able to return to teaching during the war. Previously during the 1930's married women were not allowed to work due to widespread unemployment. This meant my parents now needed, and could afford, someone to look after my sister Katharine and I. The arrival of Betty was a delight, and made a very big difference to us. One of my favourite memories of her is seeing her rush into the garden when a squadron of aeroplanes was flying overhead and shouting 'bomb Hitler, boys!'

I wasn't really aware of food shortages. My father worked every free moment growing vegetables and fruit (we were allowed to choose an apple to take to school). My mother kept hens, so we had a supply of eggs, and we went gleaning to try to collect corn for the hens. Occasionally Bill Buckle would arrive outside the back door with a rabbit; and just after the war, my father and others – particularly Jack Fell – kept a pig.

There were estate gardens across the road, where the climbing wall now is. This was a lovely walled fruit garden, with dark sheds where we went and bought plums and currants. I presume this was manned by elderly estate workers.

During the war, my father used to go out at night to lecture to groups of Polish soldiers (and airmen?) about the English constitution. Only very dim lights were allowed at night, so winter journeys were particularly hazardous. In the days of cars with no heating, it was possible to open the windscreen to be able to see better in fog or mist; my father returned on one such evening with frozen hair!

I was not very aware of which men in the village were serving in the war, but I do remember seeing one man walking back up through the village looking awful, particularly gaunt and ill: I think he was returning from Dunkirk.

The Americans arrived in Rendcomb in 1944, before the invasion of Europe. Tanks and lorries rumbled through the village and up to the playing fields, where some 5,000 men made camp. We knew they were coming, but were told very firmly not to shout 'got any gum, chum?', but fortunately there was no need, and we benefited, because someone down the road had already done so.

The soldiers left silently one night; we later heard of the D Day invasions. We also heard rumours that before they left, they dug a huge hole behind the pavilion and buried all their possessions there – things they could take no further – cameras, binoculars – all sorts. The college boys made several attempts to retrieve their goodies, but no one has succeeded so far! On the other hand, we did scavenge several empty petrol cans which we used to build a hut – only to be furious when someone in the village 're-acquired' them to build a hen-house!

VE Day and VJ Day were both marked by celebrations and huge bonfires in the village. Just after the war, my father was approached by a man in the village who during the war had fallen in love with a young widow in Holland, and he wanted to bring her and her sons to the UK, and he needed some money to go and fetch her; my father helped him with a loan – which was later repaid. I think these three young boys caused a ripple or two when they arrived, as they had been used to 'living off the land', and for a while, continued to do so. Many years later, in the week after my father died, this lovely man came to my mother and told her that from now on, he would take on the responsibility for maintaining her garden.

As some of the college staff moved on to other jobs, so their children moved too, and in 1946 I lost some of my early friends. One who moved was Granston Richards – teacher of maths and physics, the other, Earnest Neale, who taught biology. He had made a name for himself by studying and writing one of the New Naturalist books, on the badger. He took my sister Katharine – then aged seven, and me, aged ten, badger watching in Conigre Wood. I can still remember lying in the dark in the wood, hardly daring to breathe, when the unmistakable black and white animal

suddenly appeared – most exciting. Mr Neale’s pupils always did very well in public exams, and my father said he thought the examiners were relieved to read about the badger, rather than the ubiquitous rabbit!

After the Richards and Neale children left, the childhood pleasures for Hermione (Lee-Browne) and I, were mostly outside. We were great plant hunters, knew where all sorts of wild flowers grew in the area, where various birds nested, and we could identify them.

At the bottom of the Cheltenham drive was a ‘huge’ lake, where the boys canoed in the boats they had built themselves in the college workshops. If the lake froze in winter, those who were lucky enough to have skates used them, and we all tobogganed – Rendcomb is full of fantastic sloping fields – and we and all the college boys whizzed down the slopes – some more intrepid than others! The winter of 1946 was particularly bad.

At the age of ten I passed the exam to go to Cirencester Grammar School, and later became a weekly boarder at Oxford High School. At about that time, the boys at Rendcomb became an attraction, and I looked forward to going to the dances which were held on Saturday evenings in the school music room. As well as records of dance music, I seem to remember an excellent ‘group’, The Four Aces, playing. (Keith Statham, piano; Bob Jones, trumpet; John Kitto, cello; John Gilchrist, drums).

I also became very popular at my school when it was discovered that I could bring girl-friends home for the weekend and take them to the dances!

(It should be remembered that at this time Rendcomb was definitely a boys only school, and the boys were equally delighted to see the girls at the dances!)

My parents lived the rest of their lives at Rendcomb, moving to The Garden House from Conigre House after their retirement. Throughout their lives, they put their all into the college, the boys, their education, and their futures. It has been warming to my sister and I to hear many tributes to my parents’ huge contribution to the school, from many people whose lives were undoubtedly affected by them.

As an afterthought, my own admiration for my father’s teaching increased considerably after I had a gap year in which he taught me Economics and Public Affairs for A Level. At my very reputable GPDST school in Oxford, I got a B and a C for English and History at A Level. For Economics and Public Affairs, taught by JCJ, I got an A and a distinction!

Helen Comrie January 2020, revised March 2023