

John Cheney – a Life
well the beginnings of one!



Typed-up from John's manuscript
with his own corrections and additions.

By Nick Allen

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Chapter One: Beginnings in Broughton Road

I was born on 21st of September 1929 in the front first floor room at 72 Broughton Road, Banbury, the son of John Cheney and his wife Mary (nee Anson). They already had two daughters, Margaret Anne and Christine Mary. My father was hoping for a son, so rejoiced when Doctor Clement Wells shouted down the stairs 'Jack, it's a boy!'. The reason that father wanted a son, was to ensure the future of the printing business which had passed through five generations of the Cheney family since its foundation in 1767 at the Unicorn Inn, Banbury. I was the sixth generation.

No. 72 Broughton Road was, under a new numbering scheme in the nineteen-thirties, changed to 5 Broughton Road, the new numbers starting from the corner of Beargarden Road instead of The Cross. It is a tall, not very beautiful, semi-detached house. No. 1 was occupied by Tom and Madge Hankinson. Tom was a farmer, and his sister Madge had one of the earliest examples of the Fiat 500c Topolino (Mickey Mouse), a tiny, beautifully designed little car, which subsequently, formed the basis of the suspension for the successful Cooper racing cars.

No. 3 was occupied by Mr and Ms Edgar Chapman and their daughter Gladys. Edgar Chapman was a partner to his brother, Howard in Chapman Brothers, at the time Banbury's leading furnishers and drapers. Both Edgar and Howard were diminutive men, and were leading lights in the Baptist Church. Edgar Chapman had a most beautiful garden, which we overlooked from our bathroom window, so we gazed in wonder at the splendid garden parties that were held there, everybody in their best summer dresses.

On the first floor was the main bedroom (Father and Mother), a second bedroom (Margaret and Christine), and a small room at the back (me). This also served as a nursery for a time. There was a large bathroom a tiny washbasin, subsequently replaced, and the world's noisiest flush cistern. The toilet was called The Maxim and had the manufacturer's name and address on it, presumably if we needed to write to them. The bath was lovely, with wrought iron 'claw' legs and huge taps.

The second floor consisted of 'the top back bedroom', the front bedroom and the bug-room! Here was also the 'top cupboard', a massive structure containing toys, including my clockwork Hornby Train set, a collection of carved animals, a Noah's Ark, Mecanno, jigsaws, a red Schuco model racing car, bric-a-brac, and the things that might be needed but of course, never were. I slept for some time in the front room.

Until the 1939 War and the Black Out there were a gas lit street lamp immediately outside. The lamp lighter would come round on his bicycle, with his ladder slung over his shoulder, hang the ladder on the rungs built into the lamp post, climb up and activate the gas lamp. It threw a soft, yellow friendly light onto the ceiling of my room and the sound of people's boots walking up the Broughton Road would be duplicated on the ceiling shadows, long, shortening then lengthening, again as people crossed the patch of light thrown by the street

lamp. It was a secure little room and I liked it. There was a text above the bed, in a black frame: 'Commit thy way unto the Lord'. It was an iron bedstead but comfortable.

I have referred to the 'bug room'. My father was an entomologist, and, in the days when there were plenty of butterflies and moths, would stride about the fields with his butterfly net, or paint sugary syrup on telegraph poles, to attract nocturnal moths. Anything of any rarity or value would be consigned to then 'killing bottle', a screw-top jar with cyanide of potassium at the bottom, covered with a thick pad of cotton wool. The creatures never stood a chance, and no-one seemed to worry that this deadly device was left within easy reach of three young children.

On one occasion my father's hobby was being discussed with an elderly cousin. The hobby was always known in the family as 'bug-hunting' – hence the bug-room and the cousin suddenly chirped up with 'yes, we all love Jack's bug-hunting in fact we call him the family bugger!'

Our garden was long and rather narrow. It had a path with arches of rambling roses, a few fruit trees and a sandpit at the far end. Over the back wall was a tennis court and we would sit on the wall and watch the tennis players. Later we had a beautiful swing, on which I nearly killed myself I thought I had perfected the art of jumping off when the swing was at its furthest point forward. I leapt off, caught my hand on one of the ropes, the seat came forward again and caught me a resounding blow on the back of my head.

Next door at No. 7 lived the Crouchleys, sisters who disliked us, and we them. If we made too much noise they would bang on the wall. Ultimately they moved out, and a friendly man, Mr Tustain, moved in. The first we knew of his arrival was when we were in the garden and a handful of toffees came over the wall. We immediately classed him as a 'good neighbour'.

Inside No. 5 Broughton Road there was a small entrance hall with a stained glass door. This led into a hallway with a stairway to the right and a sitting room and dining room to the left. The sitting room had an open fire surrounded by bright painted square panels depicting British birds. They were colourful and I loved them. There was the piano on the right. My mother was a good pianist and used to play tunes for us to dance to, round the sofa. The door had a heavy velvet curtain to keep out the draughts. There were cabinets with displays of china in them and a lovely set of ivory chessmen.

The dining room was dark but had French windows leading into the garden. There was a massive dining table with pull-out leave and a hideous, almost black wooden side board. With a picture of great - great Granny Esther Cheney hanging above it. I remember the dining room always being dark because during the war it was an Air Raid Warden's Post (Charlie One) and a high brick wall of concrete blocks was built beyond the window, to protect us from bomb damage, but also excluding about nine-tenths of the available daylight.

Chapter Two – Up the Broughton Road

Across the road was a neat detached house inhabited by Mr A E Chidzey. He had a shop in parsons street which sold wind-up gramophones, sheet music and gramophone records. Mr Chidzey gave music lessons. He was quite an accomplished musician and had a small group of string players who provided back-ground music for social functions in the town such as the Mayoress's Dinner, 'At Home' and similar gatherings, all rather staid, they played with decorum, such things as selections from the 'Desert Song', 'Rose Marie', 'The white horse Inn' and other discreet novelties. Mr Chidzey, with a slight stoop and, I seem to remember, had a worried look.

Music also had its place on our side of the road. West of our house was the home of Mr Arthur Deacon, who was proprietor of Fox the Chemist (two shops; one in Parsons Street, one in Bridge Street). A little further up was Ena Grubb's house, Ena had a music school and lived with her father. They used to come down to our house once a week to play bridge with our parents. My sisters and I attended Mis Grubb's for piano lessons, which led to my one and only concert appearance.

It was Miss Grubb's custom to present her students in an annual concert in Banbury's Church House, now a restaurant and winebar, so even now after two glasses I seem to hear the distant tinkle of my pre-war efforts. My sister Christine and I were down to perform a piano duet, 'The White Cockade'. Christine looked very fetching in her best white dress with a coloured sash and puffed sleeves. I was in my best white shirt, tie with tie pin, grey flannel shorts, snake buckle belt and lace-up shoes. We played well, and were rewarded with my first-ever applause. This must have gone to my head as I've loved the sound of it ever since.

In my time I have written dozens of silly sketches for various amateur dramatic societies. Other people perform them and I stand at the side of the stage, in a panic. The sensation when I hear laughing and applauding the absurd things I have written, beautifully performed by my dearest friends on the stage is so rewarding. If I could choose my own epitaph it would be 'He sought to make people laugh'.

Back to Broughton Road. Beyond Miss Grubb's home was Berrymore Road corner. On that corner was a house occupied by the Hales. Mr Hale had a cycle shop in Parsons Street which specialised in cycle repairs, so Mr Hale's sons had continuous access to bike wheels of all sizes. Using these they constructed the most ingenious box-on-wheels vehicles which would hurtle down Broughton road. Steering was by string, and unreliable, but the Hale carts, as we called them, were a delightful feature of a virtually traffic free road.

Further up Broughton Road, on the right, was (and still is) a row of terrace houses. In one of these lived the Nash family. Grace and Gladys Nash were two sweet girls who acted as sort-of nursemaids to us. Life's earliest memory is of being seated in my pram and pushed up the Broughton Road by Grace (Gladys). I remember the pram being given a hefty shove up hill by Gladys (Grace) and being caught on the rebound by Grace (Gladys). Their mother was a nice lady who used to invite us to tea, which was taken in the basement of their house and was always very good. In the same terrace was Mrs Gosden's. There was an area in front of

her house filled with wonderful junk – a cross between Steptoe and Son and Auntie Wainwright in ‘Last of the Summer Wine’ of happy memories. There were bedsteads and I suspect rats.

A few doors further up was Mrs Reeves. There was a Mr Reeves but we never saw anything of him but his head. He would peer round a baize curtain and say “Ah, it’s you, I’ll get the missus”. Did he have a body or was he just some sort of animated head? A nice man but very shy. Ms Reeves was lovely. She kept this superb little shop, which had that indefinable smell of pre-war. A compound of paraffin, lifebuoy soap, fly-papers, cheap sweets and ageing biscuits. It was here that the three of us spent our Saturday penny. A penny each meant six halfpennies, six items from the ha’penny tray, which, as its name implies, had everything priced at a ha’penny: Sherbet Dab, Sherbet Fountain, Sharps Eton Toffee, Liquorice Coils, Aniseed Balls, Gob Stoppers, Sweet cigarettes (five to a packet). Choosing took time, but Mrs Reeves was large, calm and understanding and would serve other customers while we deliberated what to buy. I am glad I remember Mrs Reeves and her shop. They were part of our childhood that I recall with deep affection.

Chapter Three: On Up the Broughton Road

Woodgreen, the home of Joseph and Beatrice Gillett, was on the crest of Constitution Hill, the ‘first hill’ on our Broughton Road excursions. Joe Gillett was a Quaker and philanthropist who owned Banbury Bank, later to be taken over by Barclays. He set up a trust to provide aid for the poor and needy in and around Banbury. The Trust is still in existence, chaired by the delightful Geoffrey Braithwaite. My father for many years served as Almoner, a duty I took on after his death in 1958, and at the time of writing, continue to perform.

Woodgreen was a large, roomy (and rather ugly) house with pleasant spacious grounds bordered on the Broughton Road side by a thick holly hedge and iron spiked railings. At the western end of this hedge was a swing gate to a footpath which led across the fields to Bretch Pond. The first field had a small spinney. A notice fixed to one of the trees said ‘mowing grass, please keep to the path’. Then there was a stile into the next field and one wandered over the other fields until arriving at Bretch Pond. This was a circular, rather featureless pool, but it had frogs and newts in it. Beyond Bretch a footpath ran up the Stratford Road, and one could walk across to Hanwell, or left to Drayton and Wroxton. A bit far for me in those days, and, even more certainly, now!

It was, I suppose, inevitable that after the war all this area would be built over. All the beloved fields are gone. There are shops, pubs, a dual carriageway ring road and houses, houses, houses from the Southam road to the Oxford road and beyond. It was pleasant undulating country, ideal for we three children to wander in, picking blackberries or mushrooms, watching out for cows and bashing our willies into crusty cow-pats. It was our version of A E Housman’s poignant ‘blue remembered hills’.

If you didn’t go through the swing gate to Bretch you carried on up the main road. My memory falters here, please forgive me, but this memoir is being written getting on for seventy years after the events described. On the left, where the road began to climb up the

'second hill' was a farm run, I think by a Mr Turbett. There was a noisy dog who stood with his paws on the parapet of a high wall and barked at everybody, especially Mr Matthew's Brailes bus. This was a green bus with a roof rack which sallied forth betwixt Brailes and Banbury. It was well patronised, especially on Market Day, when the roof was piled perilously high with market purchases.

Mr Turbett did a milk round. His milk was in churns in his horse-drawn milk float, a two-wheeled small cart with a door at the back. The churns had separate pint and half-pint measures with long handles with hooks on the end which hooked on the lip of the open churn. People brought their milk jugs into the street to be filled.

On the right was a low-built farm with a muddy farmyard in front. Going up the hill on the left was a rather oddly designed house in black and white while on the right was a large advertising hoarding which exhorted the few residents of Broughton Road: 'Don't be Vague, ask for Haig', then a row of little cottages called 'Brickyard Cottages'.

On the left, later, there was Crouch Hill Road and, of course, Crouch Hill itself – was there with its distinctive landmark, a cluster of trees on top. Alas no more. On the long walk to Giants Cave one came across a big green notice outside a farm on the right. It had a splendid advertisement in capital letters, white on green:

EGGS

EGGS

EGGS

(they sold eggs)

There was a milestone, and there the path narrowed by a superb ash tree and there, around the next corner, were the mini hills and valleys of Giants Cave, ideal for cycling, picnics and hide and seek and games like kick the can. And, of course, Giants Cave itself, a dark dank entry which was obviously an artificial excavation and was said by some to go right through to Broughton castle. How did it get under the moat?

Chapter Four: The Crouch Hill Fields

Coming out of 5 Broughton Road, if you turned right and right again you found yourself in a little valley with a gentle stream running through it which disappeared into a conduit under Beargarden Road. There was a well trodden footpath with to the left a sloping field up to Bloxham Road, which was given over to allotments. To the right was a splendid elm tree. The footpath ended with a stile and a swing gate, opening on to the 'first field'. On the far right the tall chimney of the Berrymoor Laundry smoked blithely away, undisturbed by environmental regulations.

At the end of the first field the footpath led up to Crouch Hill, but to the left another field took over to the Springfield Hotel, off the Bloxham Road. N towards Crouch hill one came to The Butts. This was the firing range with quite sophisticated equipment. There were

'emplacements' every hundred yards – places where the marksmen laid down on low buttressed inclined positions from which they fired, with various degrees of accuracy, at the targets. These were housed in a deep trench on pulleys and were raised up for firing purposes, and lowered into the concrete trench when not in use. They were used by the Territorial Army and later by the Home Guard, with the somewhat limited armoury available in 1940. I seem to remember going to the Butts and the Home Guard had just got a superb American Browning automatic rifle of which they were inordinately proud.

A long field ran to the south of Crouch Hill towards Salt Lane. At its western end was Bullrush Pond, a splendid 'conservation area' for frogs and newts and a good site, with its muddy banks, for getting wellies filled with water. My father, being an entomologist, had us hunting for caterpillars, and there were also blackberries galore. As with previous chapter endings this one concludes with the inevitable 'all housing now'. It is an estate with roads named after poets, inevitably christened Poet's Corner. It has some quite distinguished residents.

Chapter Five Sundays: Church and Churchill

Sunday morning meant church, and church meant Mary's Banbury. We would hear the bells ringing at home, and during the walk down West bar, but it was only coming round the corner into Horsefair by the County Garage (now Cox and Robinson) that one was assailed by that great riot of sound, the joyful glory of the bells beautifully and accurately rung. I still love to hear it. Some people object but as Dorothy Sayers writes in the foreword of her book 'The Nine Tailors' it seems odd that (my paraphrase) people brought up to the jazz band, pop music, endless amplification and deafening discos should object to 'the one great noise made to the glory of god'.

So here we are (mother and three children) crossing Horsefair into the gloomy recesses of St Mary's church, which I never did like and still don't. It is highly decorated with coloured pillars, rather indifferent stained glass, and paintings in a sort of Pre-Raphaelite style. No I do not like it. It is glum.

And there in pew 7 was Granny Cheney. Pew 7 was our family pew, and we sat in it with Granny Cheney on the end, then us and mother. The bells would stop, the choir would file in and the service would start. It was Morning Prayer as laid down in the Book of Common Prayer. I love now (when we are allowed it once a month), but I found it hard going in 1935. The only good thing about it was the phrase 'miserable offenders' in the General Confession which my sister Christine and I always giggled at because we thought it referred to the fenders that were put in front of the fire to prevent coal falling out on to the carpet. There is also the phrase in the General Confession about leading 'a godly, righteous and sober life'. These days I miss out the 'sober'.

I never got on well with Granny Cheney. She was always on about education with the unspoken implication that everyone was cleverer than me. Probably, nay almost certainly, true, but nevertheless irritating. The vicar was A.L.E. Williams (known to those who ought to

have known better as 'Beery Bill). He radiated unctuous goodness and preached to my ears, incredibly long, dull and tedious sermons.

The best thing about St Mary's was the organist, Mr Charles R Palmer who liked playing loudly, with frequent use of the trumpet stop on the organ. The organ was rebuilt in the Thirties and the new organ gave Charles R Palmer full rein for his considerable talent. He was a nice man. His wife had a little Austin 7 and she and my mother used to go to Oxford in it weekly to rehearse in the Oxford Bach Choir. I still have the music, ticket programmes of their concerts. Among other alumni was a certain Edward Heath, later to become Prime Minister.

Mattins at St Mary's droned to a standstill and we all trooped up to 15 West Bar, me hoping that Grandpa Cheney would be there. I was lucky with my Grandpas – Cheney and Anson. More about Grandpa Anson later on, but let me write a gentle appreciation about Grandpa Cheney. A short man, a fine printer and a good musician. If he was home he would take us up the garden, across a little lane into his vegetable garden. There were gooseberry bushes and blackcurrants. Grandpa Cheney would give us the gooseberries (don't tell your Granny) and an occasional new laid egg. He had a little beard and he didn't mind when we pulled it. Then home to lunch. My father used to visit a friend late on Sunday mornings and they would partake of a few glasses of sherry blended with gin, a lethal mixture as I was to later discover. Father ran off short fuse and could sometimes be 'difficult'. I was in awe of him, and Sunday lunch did not always find him at his best.

The roast joint, from Rathbones, was always first class. Occasionally, as a special treat, we had roast chicken, before the war considered a delicacy (and even more so during it!). When it was roast beef's turn the Yorkshire pudding was always done under the meat, which gave it a superb flavour, not like the individual balloon-like flavourless Yorkshires today, with notable exceptions which I am not prepared to disclose. Pork had superb crunchy crackling. And the lamb, known as mutton in those days, was always good.

A diversion, while I remember it. There was a butcher in Banbury (at the top of Parsons Street I think) who specialised in first class mutton and lamb. His name was Mr Jelfs. He sadly died and mother and father went to the funeral. Father arrived home chuckling most irreverently "know what Charles R Palmer played at the end of the service? Sheep may safely graze".

John himself has, I'm afraid, now retired permanently from writing anymore of his charming 'memoire'. May he rest peacefully somewhere in those Elysian Fields of his childhood. Goodbye old friend – it has been a real pleasure typing-up your memoire as I was born the year before you were born and have similar memories of a gentler life pre-war.

Nick Allen, March 2014.