

Derrick Robbins on Life in Deddington in the 1930s



Deddington OnLine is accessed around the world, tugging at the heart strings of those who, once upon a time, felt happy and safe in our village. Great seems to be their joy that through 'the net' memories of past days have tipped them into that nostalgic mood to write down recollections of youthful days. No matter where the path of life had led and what excitement or disappointments had been in store, looking back on our youth, remembering all those who populated it, has a most therapeutic effect. Just tarry a while and contemplate what one of our readers has to say:

'I can't tell you how thrilled I was when I discovered I could contact the UK on the internet and I had two sources of reaching out to Deddington. Firstly your wonderful pages of the *Deddington News* which kept me occupied for days and secondly the www.maps allowing me to wander around Deddington at will.' So writes Derrick Robbins of Sarasota, Florida, and forwards 16 pages of tightly packed glimpses into his past. Memories of his delightfully eccentric grandpa Job Bull, father of 11 children, of Granny Bull in her floor-length black dresses who always wore an apron and incredibly a man's flat cap. Memories of visiting his Deddington relations with his mother and spending the years of the WWII with his uncle Chris Ell, boot and shoe repairer, and his aunt Mill at Tower View in the Bullring.

Throughout the many pages, recollections of people and places tumble in glorious disorder from Derrick's mind, and putting them into chronological order almost seems to be a crime. Many of our older readers will no doubt recognise people and places of Derrick's meandering. Here's a taster:

'After the war I spent three years in the Army. When I was demobbed I found life very dull at home in London so I packed a bag and off I went to Deddington for two weeks. I went for long walks, worked in my uncle and aunt's garden, tended the chickens and pigs and then returned to London, fully refreshed. There is something about the air in Deddington.'

* * * * *

'I was born in East Dulwich in 1928. My parents were Frederick Robbins and Edith whose mother was the second wife of Job Bull who lived in Horsefair Lane. From the age of about two my mother would bring me to Deddington to stay with my uncle Chris Ell, a boot and shoe repairer, and his wife Millicent, my mother's sister, in Tower View in the Bullring.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939 I came to live in Deddington with my aunt Mill and uncle Chris as a private evacuee. My aunt took me to the headmaster of the local school, I believe his name was Mr Harmsworth. Just before the outbreak of war I had taken my school exams but the papers were lost, so I had to sit the exam again, and, after some further mix up, was told that I had passed and could attend Banbury County School. So began my daily trip on the Oxford bus to school and back. Boys upstairs and girls downstairs!

In Deddington I joined the church choir run by the Vicar the Revd Dr Frost, who paid us 1/2d for each attendance. I still remember well that a lady from Abingdon used to attend church and that two choirboys were allowed to sit in the back of the Vicar's little black Austin when he drove her back again. We

had to hold our breath when he put his foot down hard on the accelerator. However, the Vicar was kind to us boys even though he could bring us up sharply when we misbehaved!

Job Bull and uncle Chris' father Mr Ell senior, had come to join Uncle Chris and Aunt Mill after the deaths of their wives. Both elderly gentlemen had an allotment off the Hempton Road where they spent their days and in the evenings they would sit together at home puffing their pipes, smoking tobacco called 'thick twist' which came in rolls like liquorice and had to be cut and chopped with a sharp knife'.

* * * * *

'Grandma Bull was a rum one', writes Derrick, probably searching for an apt word to describe this charming old lady who died before WWII when he was but a young child. 'She always wore a black dress down to the floor and as a child I thought she had no legs because I never saw them. She wore a man's flat cap and an apron at all times, even when out shopping or going to church. Granny Bull used the daily newspaper as a tablecloth, it saved washing and could be used each morning to light the cooking range. On my visits to her I was delighted to read 'Rupert Bear' from the tablecloth'.¹

'I remember well Mr Hall, publican of the King's Arms. He ran a bus service for civilians before the war, but during the war drove two small utility buses with uncomfortable wooden seats in which he took workers to the two aluminium factories, one in Banbury and the other beside the railway station south of Adderbury. All day long trailers would pass through Deddington on their way to these factories, carrying parts of crashed or damaged aircraft, British and German. On windy days parts of these planes were blown off the trailers and we children would race each other to see what treasures could be found. My biggest souvenir was a bomb release switch off a German bomber. I believe these two factories built wings for the RAF. One day we came out of school to find a repaired and rebuilt ME109 in the Market Place. We children were allowed to crawl all over it and I sat in the cockpit letting my imagination fly'.

* * * * *

Commuter Travel London

'I started travelling alone from about the age of seven. It was quite safe in those days. I would leave my home in Forest Hill, East Dulwich early in the morning, board a No. 63 bus and travel about 6 miles to Peckham High Street. From there I'd take a No. 35 bus to Paddington Station and catch the 9.10am express train to Wolverhampton making quite sure to climb into a carriage labelled 'Bicester Slip' (normally the last two coaches on the Wolverhampton express). Just before the train reached Bicester I was greatly relieved each time to feel it slow down, brakes grinding while the 'Bicester Slip' coaches were uncoupled from the express which speeded on, without stopping to Banbury. My fellow passengers and I could now safely cruise to a halt at Bicester station. A steam tank engine would be coupled to our carriages to pull us down the line to Banbury, stopping at all the stations in-between. I would leave this train at Aynho Station and walk through Clifton to Deddington and my favourite holiday home, Tower View.'

¹ Maybe she was a rum character in 1930s terms, but in 2006 her eccentricity could be thought very wise and forward looking. Recycling paper, saving water, and what fun to have a tablecloth on which to draw or from which to enrich your word power!

'Just occasionally, Great Western Railway (God's Wonderful Railway) forgot all about slip coaches, in which case I had to sit tight in the express until it stopped at Banbury then jump on the next available bus to Deddington' (no synchronisation of rail and bus time tables then, just as now!)

'At the beginning of the war my uncles Chris Ell and George Clarke built an air raid shelter in the back garden of Tower View. I suspect it was the only one in Deddington. It became a great playhouse for my cousin Chris Clarke and me except for about 10 minutes one night when we all took shelter for real when a German bomber flew around over Deddington. I can't remember quite clearly now if that was the same night when two bombs were dropped into a field south of Deddington which failed to explode. But I remember well walking into that field with my aunt to inspect the two holes in the ground. Neither Police nor military personnel nor safety fencing stopped us from looking down those holes!

My uncles dug out a second air raid shelter, not nearly as grandiose as ours, for Grandpa Bull and Mr Ell senior. My uncles reckoned, quite rightly, that neither of them would take shelter without puffing away on his pipe, which, during an expected lengthy stay under ground could have become a greater hazard to the rest of us than German bombs!'

* * * * *

Derrick ponders on the location of his Aunt Emily Tooth's grave in Deddington churchyard. He remembers Emily, sister of his uncle Chris Ell, as a most kind, loving and gentle person – recalling meetings dating from childhood to when he brought his bride to meet her at Rose Cottage, Earl's Lane. With help from José Stevens, whose mother, Mrs West, was Emily's friend, I was able to locate the grave where Emily and her husband Arthur Horace Tooth's ashes rest and reassure Derrick that his favourite aunt is by no means forgotten by Deddington's older generation.

In the 1960s Mrs Tooth and Mrs West were the first parishioners to respond to their Vicar George Palmer's request to serve refreshments after Sunday Services in Deddington church. I well remember enjoying a cup of milky coffee served from the back of the church. In days gone by, when the present church kitchen was but a Parochial Church Councillor's wishful thought, preparation of this friendly offering followed by washing up, consisted of a complicated drill, well thought out by the two charming ladies.

Derrick remembers that Aunt Emily was educated at a prestigious school where she became very friendly with a girl of her own age. When they left school Emily went to live with her friend, Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (later the Queen Mother), becoming her paid companion. Also in the employ of Lady Elizabeth's father, the 14th Earl of Strathmore, was Arthur Horace Tooth, the family's chauffeur. Emily and Arthur fell in love and married. They enjoyed living in many lovely homes generously supplied by the Earl.

'Before WWII they lived in a Chelsea Mews flat, but when the fighting started they moved to a large house in Dartmouth. While I was stationed in Exeter in the Army, I would visit them and sit on their private beach on the river, or take a boat out, or wander in the beautifully kept garden along the riverbank. Arthur was a born prankster. When I arrived at Dartmouth station he would be waiting there beside the Earl's old Daimler, resplendent in his old-fashioned uniform. He would call out so that everybody could hear: 'Over here, my Lord; her Ladyship has tea ready on the lawn!' We would then drive off and he would burst into fits of laughter. How I miss them both! The old Daimler, by the way,

was one of those cars where the passenger seats in the back were enclosed, while the driver sat in the open. I imagine there was some form of protection against wet weather. Communication between front and back was by way of a speaking tube!

* * * * *

'Uncle George Ell² worked at Johnson's Lumber Yard much to the dismay of the local man from the Ministry of Labour, who thought that he should be doing more productive war work. He tried many times, without success, to have him moved. With so many locals in the services there was no one to take his place. One night my aunt roused me from bed to take me to the square where Johnson's lumber was in flames. The little hand pumped fire trailer made little impression on the fire and the whole place burned down. Some folk said it was sabotage and some, God rest their souls, said it was the only way the man from the Ministry of Labour could move Uncle George, to send him to the Aluminium Factory in Banbury!

Although I was under age I joined the Air Force Cadets. We met once a week either in the village school or in a large barn-like building behind the big house in the Bullring. In charge of us was a fiery Scot by the name of Jock McCutcheon. Uncle George was in the Royal Observer Corps who had a lookout post in the middle of the allotments off the Hempton Road. Sometimes I accompanied him and I became quite proficient in aircraft recognition. While at Banbury County School some friends and I used to walk to the railway station where, at the same time every day, a train full of wounded troops passed through, slowly winding its way northwards. One day, while wandering through Banbury during our lunch break, we were startled by the roar of a very low-flying aircraft, a Dornier, which dropped a bomb near the Red Cross train in Banbury Station. And another time our teachers marched us into Banbury Road where, opposite the hospital, soldiers were standing smartly to attention being inspected by King George VI.'

Derrick remembers many Deddington village nicknames. I tried them out on José Stevens and the Tibbetts sisters, who almost without hesitation remembered not only the person, but also everyone's proper name. I wonder how many readers reach an equally high score. Who were Dooker, Dibby, Lamby Coles, Fishy Drinkwater, Ticky Wells, The Brown Bomber, Doughy Dodwell. Titchy Woods? Just one clue, Derrick Robbins was Robey).

* * * * *

Reporting occasionally about his life in Sarasota, Florida, Derrick writes: 'For the last five years I have been a volunteer with the Sarasota Police Department doing foot patrol down town and car patrol along one of the beaches. My uniform is a blue shirt, black long trousers, combat boots and a baseball cap. I carry a police radio, but no handcuffs or gun. I am also a member of a Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) under the auspices of the Homeland Security. It involves extensive training. We cover our own 'backyard' and are deployed in the event of a terrorist attack, a major accident or a hurricane.

² It pays to slip up when reporting: I mistakenly added the surname Ell to Uncle George's Christian name. I apologise to Derrick and to our readers in the village. Derrick, of course, was referring to his Uncle George Clarke, but my mistake was well spotted by a senior Deddingtonian who put me right and I am delighted to know that at least one person reads my column!

Since I only became a member of the CERT in April 2005, I have not been involved in a hurricane disaster and I hope the local belief that a sacred Seminal Indian Burial Ground protects us from such tragic events holds true in future.'

If, as he claims, Derrick's war years as a voluntary refugee in Deddington shaped the man, Deddington can be very proud of one of their own out there in far away Florida. We leave him attending to his many citizen's duties, his chores at home in his bungalow and in his garden where the climate allows him to enjoy a plentiful harvest. In his spare time, would you believe it, our friend is writing a recipe book. Thank you Derrick for helping us to discover another little slice of life in dear old Deddington spiced with characters that should not be forgotten.³

The complete collection of Ruth Johnson's writings, which originally appeared in Deddington News between 1990 and 2010, can be found [here](#)

³ Derrick remembers many Deddington village nicknames. I tried them out on José Stevens and the Tibbetts sisters, who almost without hesitation remembered not only the person, but also everyone's proper name. I wonder how many readers reach an equally high score. Who were Dooker, Dibby, Lamby Coles, Fishy Drinkwater, Ticky Wells, The Brown Bomber, Doughy Dodwell. Titchy Woods? Just one clue, Derrick Robbins was Robey).