

A Childhood in Chinnor

When I look back to my childhood in 1950's Chinnor I am usually either in or near my home in the High Street, an end of terrace cottage opposite the Congregational Church. A family friend once said what a draughty house we lived in but my memory is of the warmest, happiest of homes. I lived there with my older brother, my parents, our old border collie Juno, tortoiseshell cat Susie, six hens and we even had a pig called Chug for a year or so. My dad won him at a village fete when he was a tiny piglet (Chug, not my dad!) . I often wonder if my decision to stop eating pork some years later is somehow connected to dear old Chug who loved having his back scratched on our daily trip to collect eggs. His sty and the hen house were at the bottom of the garden beyond a beautifully kept vegetable patch. This self-sufficiency was so common in those bygone days. In fact the square mile of Chinnor had everything we could need.

My mum would shop daily, sometimes giving me a list to take to Brazell's, a grocer on Lower Icknield Way. I felt very grown up as I stepped into the double fronted shop and peered up at the polished mahogany counter. Reaching up to hand over the note to a smiling, jovial shopkeeper who had a white apron tied at the front. I watched him weigh out sugar or flour by scooping it into a blue paper bag using a shiny, wooden handled ladle. I was fascinated by the way he sliced through a hunk of cheddar cheese with a thin wire, somehow always cutting off the exact weight that was needed.

As I walked home, I would pass the small pond on the corner of Lower Road opposite the Red Lion pub, sometimes I would stop and climb onto the metal rungs of the railing and peer in but never saw any fish. In those days there were two lovely old houses at the bottom of the High Street, one was Grafton House just beyond the pond, similar in design to the Manor House which still stands further up the street. I remember an American family moving in for a while and I often played with the children. I was fascinated by their accent and they tried hard to persuade me to taste peanut butter. At the time this seemed so exotic and foreign but try as they might I would not taste this strange food. I still think of those children whenever I see and sometimes even eat peanut butter.

A field bordered our cottage and the garden of Grafton House, while it's orchards were laid out behind us, hence the name Grafton Orchard. There was usually a herd of cows in the field and we often saw one of them peering in through an open window of our cottage. Partly due to poor fencing but more likely due to my mother feeding her at the window.

On the opposite side of the road where Doveleat is now there was a beautiful old house with bay windows where Miss Russell-Cooke lived. She had stables and could often be seen riding up the High Street. I have a memory of a tall elegant lady with dark hair tied back beneath a black riding hat wearing a fitted jacket, jodphurs and long very shiny leather boots. We would never have been able to afford riding lessons with her but I had a lot of fun on a friend's pony, Wilfred, who lived on a smallholding along The Knoll, as a section of Lower Icknield Way was known locally then.

As I sauntered up the road with the shopping I would pass the dairy which was owned by the Neighbour family. The dairy supplied milk for Chinnor residents and many surrounding villages. As I look back I can see Frank Neighbour, wearing brown tweeds, leaning on a gate, chatting to a passer by. Almost certainly someone I knew and was possibly related to. They nodded to me as I crossed the road to deliver my purchases to my mum.

A few years later another member of the Neighbour family, Nora, a village school teacher took me on an outing which I will never forget but that is another story for another day.

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