THE LOST WORLD OF EASTCOMBE AND NEARBY
A factual record of 1960s-80s written and illustrated by Paul Beer in 2023

Introduction

I love looking back to my childhood and youth. I want to share my memories with others. With failing sight, and an imminent eye operation concentrating my mind, I decided to set everything down while I can in the hope that children and grandchildren will learn about the lost world of my generation.

The Family

We moved from 19 The Glebe, Minchinhampton, to 24 (later 56) Bracelands, Eastcombe, at the beginning of the 1960s. Before marriage my mother Patricia lived at Westcot, Chalford Hill. My father grew up in Cardiff in a family of five boys and five girls, the children of William and Florence Beer, at 6 Despencer Street next to the River Taff. Across the river was Cardiff Arms Park, and it was only five minutes' walk from Cardiff Central railway station to my grandparents' house, over the Wood Street bridge and along the embankment.

Both my grandfathers served in the Great War. William F Beer was in the army, and Ernest W Webb in the Royal Navy. William in particular was deeply affected by his experience in the trenches, but both lost many friends. My grandmothers were both Welsh. My Nan Beer was from the coal mining region of Mountain Ash in the Cynon Valley. Her name was Florence. Her own grandfather was a pit prop shorer man. My other, Chalford Hill, nan was Annie who came from Aberystwyth. Her mother was called Jane and she was Irish, a hard-working lady who worked at the post office there. My mother said that when she herself was young, Jane ran a guest house, so she, her sisters Joan and Valerie and their mother would go every summer to help, being met off the train by Nan's brother Albert. Jane's husband was killed in the great storm of October 1927, so I never met him.

Three of my dad's elder brothers served in the army in World War 2. Another was in the navy, was torpedoed and believed lost – but turned up months later. He appeared in army uniform, his original having been covered in oil while he was in the sea. He was lucky to have survived.

In my teens I used to go over to my grandparents in Chalford Hill, and it was while I was helping there – cutting grass and chopping logs – that I learned that Grandfather and his brother left school at 13 and joined the Royal Navy. Ernest's first ship was HMS Dreadnought and in 1915 he witnessed the sinking of U29. He said no one cheered, respecting the deaths of fellow sailors. He was on HMS Canada and his brother on HMS Valiant at the Battle of Jutland in 1916.

The house at Bracelands, Eastcombe

My first real memory at Bracelands, then a cul-de-sac, was the notably snowy winter of 1962/63. The little estate was recently built on land that used to belong to St Elizabeth's, the former orphanage next door. Our sitting room was large, with a coal fireplace. The kitchen was a good-sized room with a coal-fired boiler, an 'Ideal.' This heated the room – always the warmest in the house – but also heated our hot water. To stoke the boiler we would drop in coal from a lid hatch at the top, using a metal hook when the lid was hot. When the fire was going well we could fold down a door at the front, warming the room to a comfortable temperature.

In the 1960s Bracelands, our part was a cul-de-sac. Number 1 was on the main road next to the house called St Mary's, and the newly built semi-detached houses ran up to the

crossroads and then went round to the left towards the village green, and then left again into our cul-de-sac. This was later extended with new houses on both sides of the road.. The numbering was consecutive, so when the extra building was finished only the highest original numbering had to be changed.

Our house, originally 24 Bracelands, was renumbered 56

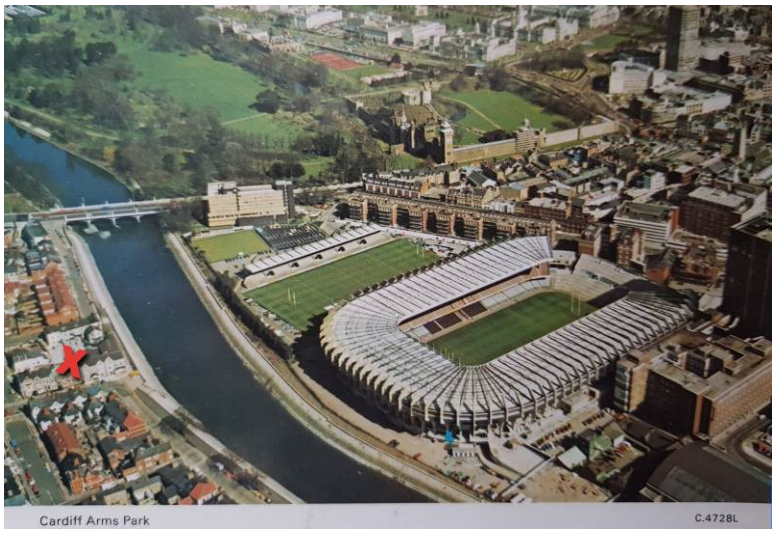
Our main transport was by bus, occasionally train, and sometimes on my father's motorcycle. Nobody in the street had a car at that time, but most men had a motorbike. My dad had a Velocette – known as a 'Noddy bike' and used by the police. We rode on the back of this Velocette down to Stroud, and parked in the London Road car park alongside the railway line. You had to pay at a wooden hut. At that time my father worked at Brockworth on the site of the old Gloucester Aircraft Company, then Hawker Siddeley. Before this my father was in the RAF, based at Aston Down, and this is were he met my mother who worked in the canteen at the airfield.

Visiting the Cardiff Family

Through most of my childhood we would visit Cardiff nearly every year to see the family on my father's side. Sometimes it would just be my father and me, and usually it would by train from Chalford via Gloucester. Back then Gloucester was a main goods transfer area with many railway lines, so we would cross from Eastgate station over the largest footbridge I have ever seen. The bridge was more than100 years old, and as you walked across to the

Central station you could see the rails and waggons through the gaps in the floor. I found this exciting. I liked steam trains. These corridor trains lined with compartments went through Newport to Cardiff, and once there we would cross the bridge and walk 10 minutes along by the River Taff to reach my father's home. The house was very tall with three storeys, and there was coloured glass in the top half of the front door. Grandfather, affected by his experiences in the trenches, would sometimes have a bad day and would sit alone in a separate room. So many men suffered in this way, something that I understood much better when I was older. He died of cancer in 1967, and Dad felt the asbestos lining the ships' boilers he worked on probably played a part in killing him. My Nan Beer was lovely, and liked to tell tales of days gone by.

Chalford station in the 1960s



Cardiff Arms Park, the River Taff, with Despencer Street below the red cross

Since there were 10 children my dad's family could get a bit confusing. There were many cousins, some in Penarth, and I knew best those who were closest to me in age.

In Cardiff I liked the trolley buses, but I also spent time watching the coal trains pass over the rail bridge crossing the Taff. The river was black with coal dust washing down from the coal field upstream.

We also visited our relations in Aberystwyth, where our Nan Webb's Irish mother,

widowed in 1927, was still alive. We were told that her father, John Young, had been a lighthouse keeper. In 1882 when Calf Rock lighthouse collapsed in a big storm, he and the other keepers had to survive two weeks before being rescued – an event that made national news at the time.

Teresa, Pat and Paul at Aberystwyth in 1963

Great grandmother Jane died in 1964. I remember that my father hired a lorry and went with Grandfather Ernest to collect the things left to Nan Annie. Suddenly Westcot filled with unfamiliar things, the largest of which was a stunning Welsh dresser with carvings and blue glass doors. The funniest item was a big cage containing a green and yellow budgie. It spoke in an Irish accent, surprising everyone with how well it talked. Great grandmother Jane must have talked to it a lot. The bird just wouldn't stop talking and irritated Grandfather. When Nan Annie was out he would throw a cloth over the cage so that the bird thought night had come, and settled down. Seeing the cover one day Annie told Ernest off – which was funny at the time.

Childhood Christmases and Winters

Our Christmases were always spent with our grandparents at Westcot in the Randalls Green area of Chalford Hill. Nan Annie would cook a great lunch with her home-made Christmas puddings for 'afters', and later a delightful evening meal. My ex-navy grandfather smoked his pipe, kept a nice open fire going, and in the evenings the flames sent shimmering light across the walls... This basic old Cotswold stone cottage had no luxuries, just a cold water tap in the kitchen, no bathroom, and an outside toilet, but it always felt cosy with its thick walls retaining the heat of the roaring coal or log fire. The sitting room was up a stone step through a low doorway housing a latched door – it felt built for shorter people some hundreds of years in the past. There was a couch with wooden arms – it could be turned into a bed – and my grandparents had armchairs either side of the fire. By the opposite wall stood an opening-out table, with padded wooden dining chairs. At the end of the wall beyond the table was a thickly curtained doorway leading to a short corridor, and the stairway. The corridor had a shelf full of my grandparents' books. At the top of the stairs was a characterful box room with a window giving a view down the Chalford valley. Next

was a central room, and then up a wooden step was a larger room with sloping ceilings. Its window faced uphill. And yet again beyond, another wooden step led down into our grandparents' bedroom.

This was large, with a double bed facing a fireplace in the gable end. There was a window in the gable to the right of the hearth, giving a view past a cottage in the lane below to fields and a farm on the other side of the valley. Alongside the bed was another window that looked over gardens and orchards across to Aston Down. You could see the orange wind sock on the airfield.

Outside was a lean-to shed where my grandfather kept his tools and coal and logs. Besides many large flat stones there was a great rainwater tank near the front door. I remember the sound of the gutters draining into the tank when it was raining. A long path had a flower bed to one side and the vegetable garden to the other. There were three lawns and a very tall apple tree giving ideal shade in summer time. At the far end of the garden, next to the tall drystone wall above the lane, was a hazelnut tree.

The main path up from the gate was steep and bordered by great stones, making a deep cutting through high ground. The boundary wall was topped by large horizontal stones and standing up there felt like looking out from a castle. When on that higher level you sometimes heard the whistles of the steam trains and saw the smoke in the valley – a view that was later blocked by new houses.

Westcot, home of my maternal grandparents in Chalford Hill

Every Boxing Day our grandparents would come to us at Bracelands. My father used to go over to Westcot on his motorbike, pick up my nan first, bring her back and then return for my grandfather Ernest. Before that he would stoke the kitchen boiler and build up the sitting room fire ready for the continuing Christmas celebrations. (My grandfather liked rum to drink, probably from his days in the navy.) That 1962 Boxing Day was very cold indeed and there was an urgent need to get my grandparents back to Chalford Hill. Through the winter well into 1963 there were many snowfalls and I remember watching my father layer up to hike out to get things, or to deliver necessities to Westcot.

In winter time my sister Teresa and I would take hotwater bottles to bed, and our mother always warned us not to lie on them or they would burst. The windows iced up on the inside, and the only way we could see out was to place a warm hand against the pane a few times to melt the ice until we could make a peep hole. As winter continued thick chunks of ice built up at the bottom of the windows, the result of the ice thawing from our efforts and then refreezing .

In those days icy roads were gritted not salted, and later that grit could block the drains. Each village had a council road man, and ours was called Fred Beavis (later the chimney sweep), who would clear blockages and treat icy areas. In the autumn he cleared away leaves from the walkways, and in summer cleared the gulleys in the verges and cut them with a bill hook, sometimes with other men.

Neighbours

Our place at Bracelands was on the corner of the cul-de-sac facing Hilltop, the house built in the 1870s to house the man who was employed to do all the outside jobs at St Elizabeth's orphanage. St Elizabeth's tree-lined drive runs parallel to our stretch of Bracelands and Mrs Renshaw lived there with land still stretching down to Dr Crouch's Road, containing apple, pear, and plum trees. Now two semi-detached houses, the orphanage was originally built as a private venture by one philanthropic woman, but handed into the care of the 'Kilburn Sisters' in 1882. Latterly (before its closure in 1942) the man-of-all-work had been Ernest Gaston, who continued living at Hilltop with his family. Just he and his daughter Phyllis were there at the beginning of the 1960s. They kept chickens in little huts facing the entrance to Bracelands.

Former orphanage St Elizabeth's and Hilltop before Bracelands was built

Phyllis said there were big protests when the houses of Bracelands were built, and her father was greatly upset by the loss of fine views. Sadly, he later became blind, and was looked after by his daughter till his death in 1971. He had been the last gardener for the orphanage. He was also a qualified baker, and his sister Ivy worked in the orphanage kitchen. After his death Phyllis moved to a bungalow opposite Bussage village hall, and was greatly missed by my mother Pat as they had become good friends. [Phyllis's own reminiscences can be read in *Oil Lamp and Candle* that is also preserved on www.eastcombearchive.org.uk though not in full.]

On the other side of Hilltop is a double cottage called The Ramblers, where George and Maud Bragg lived with their boys Godfrey and Peter. They also owned the field uphill of Hilltop, and kept chickens there. They passed our house morning and night, opening up and closing the chicken sheds to keep the hens safe from foxes. In the summer of 1969, George told my father Bill that he needed something for storage, so Dad suggested he could get these oblong boxes made of plywood, waterproofed with grey paint, that were used for jet pipes where he worked at Hawker Siddeley. George like that idea so on a July day the boxes arrived on a lorry at the head of the cul-de-sac. The boxes were lifted off by Bob Bingle's timber crane and a large crowd gathered to watch it happen. The boxes were 18ft long, 7ft high and 5ft wide. Over the next few very hot days Bill cut out holes as the boxes had no doorways. This was at the time of the moon-landing and Bill made a pithy reply when George said he could see it. George seemed funny at the time, but the boxes lasted for many years, showing how well made they were, and a good bargain.

My mother had many friends, and my older sister Teresa had her own connections. (Younger sister Debra was not born till March 1967.) Next door in the other half of our semi-detached house were Frank and Margaret McKee with children Paul, Trisha, Kathleen, and later Tracy. At 23 Bracelands were Fred and Jean Townsend with their children Ann, Bev, Peter, twins Julie and Pam, Nick, and Linda. Jean knew my mother before as she was from Chalford also and they were great friends.

Bracelands cul-de-sac in the 1960s

Names from 1960s Bracelands, using their house numbers, were 1 Beavis, 2 Garrett, 3 Davies, 4 Davies, 5 Townsend, 7 Shaylor, 8 Bembridge, 10 King, 11 Burgess, 12 Lapper, 13 Davis, 14 Hathaway, 15 Will Greenwood (who had been landlord of The Lamb for 20 years), 16 Young, 17 Martin, 18 Tanner, 19 Driscoll (great friend of our family), 20 Fred Beavis, 21 Flanstone, 22 Taylor, 23 Townsend, 24 Beer, 25 McKee. Of course, these are the numbers from the original cul-de-sac, but after the later extension of the road our end was renumbered. Apologies for any names spelled wrongly!

Among random other characters in the village was Gerry Lowe, who had taken over

running the Post Office from the parents of his wife, Dorothy Ridler-Dutton. He moved it from Beam Ends to a purpose-built place up the lane – where he sold miscellaneous other things if a profit seemed possible. Downhill from there, at the top of the lane down to Bismore, is the track to Rodways Farm. In the 1960s the farmer was Ernest Godwin, having married the widow Rodway. He went everywhere on his tractor with the bucket seat. He always waved to us children, and never minded us on his land when there was snow on the ground. Those slopes are just right for tobogganing!

There were several builders in the village, including Alan Smith who followed his father Ernie into the trade. Among many other projects Alan built Fourwinds on what had been Mr Gaston's chicken run, and also in the 1960s – before the extension of Bracelands - he built the village hairdresser's shop.

The area had a number of old small quarries (for example where the Bingles had their woodyard), and one contained the council grit supply. That one was at the end of the village on the Bisley road, just past the Hinchcliffes' bungalow. In the 1960s it was much deeper, and had sheds at the bottom.

Another man I remember was Bob Apew, the village policeman who served Eastcombe, Bussage and Bisley. The police house and office was in Bisley, but Bob would visit Eastcombe, and the shop, once a week (unless called out at other times, of course).

The Village Shop and Other Suppliers

Downhill from our part of Bracelands, past the entrance to St Elizabeth's and The Lindens, is the triangular Green. At the top corner stands the Stores. The general stores and post office had been in various previous houses but was at or near the Green after WW2. When I was growing up there were few supermarkets and the Stores supplied us with food items and other essentials. Groceries, even some meat, were delivered from Eastcombe Stores by Ken Davies in an Austin van. He was from Chalford Hill and lived near the Duke of York pub. At the foot of the Green stands The Lamb Inn, which was run with a firm hand by Ron Saunders. The red public telephone box, much used then as few people had a phone in the house, is also at the foot of the Green and below that Gerry Lowe had had a new building put up where he ran the Post Office, with a new house for the Lowe family below.

The farm building behind the telephone kiosk, previously part of the farm that became The Lamb and now converted to a house called Two Pillars, was where Gerald Gardiner ran his coalyard. Sandy-haired Gerald worked by himself, wearing a distinctive grey képi with a leather peak. He delivered coal to us every two or three weeks, always very obliging. His nearest rival was Smarts' near the roundhouse at Chalford bottom, but we preferred Gerald as he would turn out at any time if one had run out of coal. He wore a leather cover on his back when making deliveries. His bungalow was set back between The Ramblers and Hilltop. Sadly, he died not long after retirement.

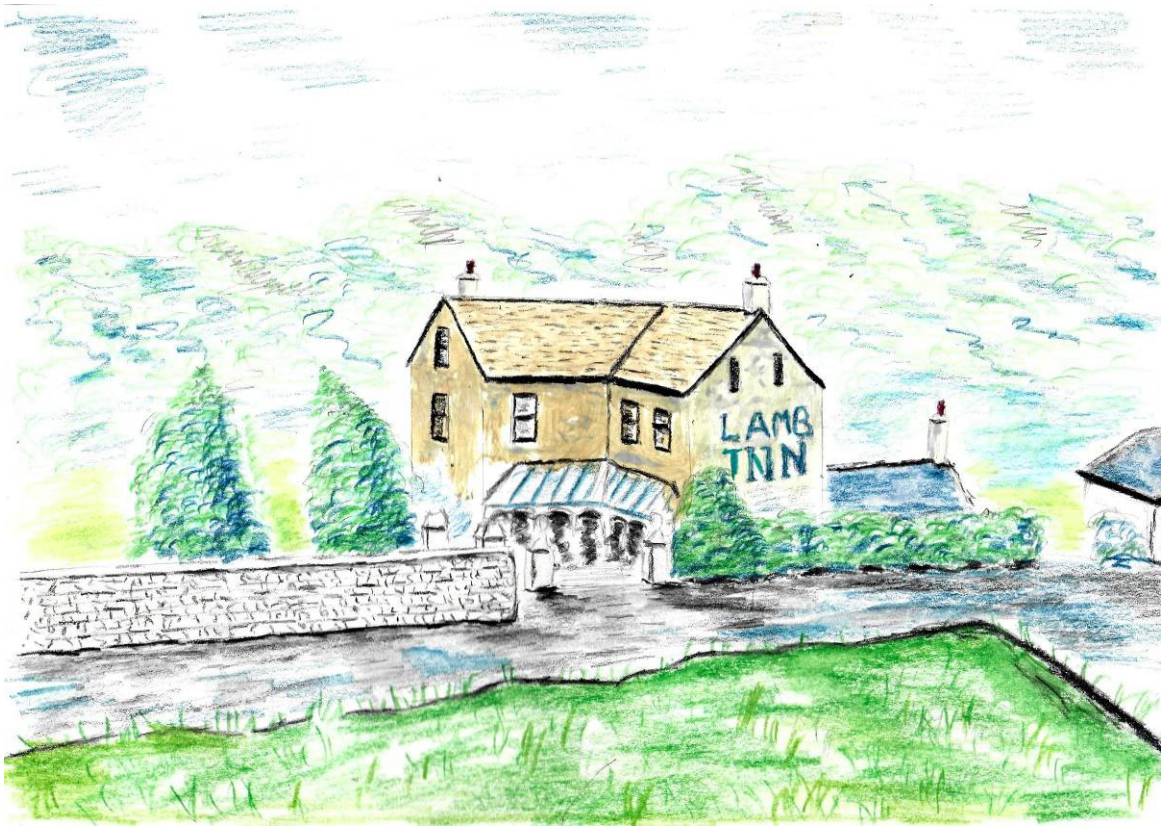
In Bisley there was a legendary shop run by Doreen Kilminster. She was a very good business woman, selling not only the downstairs groceries but also a great range of goods stacked upstairs. Only boxes were visible in the windows. At the counter she had a wooden seat for customers. One day in the mid 1970s I needed rubber boots as I was getting wet feet a lot, so my mother Pat suggested going to Bisley. I arrived in Doreen's store in the hope she would have what I needed. Looking around made it seem a wasted journey, but I asked Doreen whether she had wellington boots. What size? Size 9. She told me to sit down, and disappeared upstairs. I could hear stuff being moved around on the wooden floor above my head, and at least 10 minutes later, giving me time to think I was going to be fobbed off with some old rubbish, the moving stopped, silence followed, and Doreen

reappeared. 'This will do. You try them on.' I did, and they were perfect, better than anything I could get in Stroud, and I must have looked surprised. 'I do not keep poor quality here,' said Doreen: so I paid, and thanked her, and went back to Eastcombe happy.

Once a month Doreen used to load her estate car right up to the roof – it would not have been possible to cram in more than she did – and she would drive on a round that included Bracelands. The most amazing thing was that she always knew where everything was in the back. To load it like that would not be legal today! She was a very good businesswoman with a sharp mind, she worked very long hours and was fair, providing a wonderful service. Going to her stores was a unique experience. She was such a character.

Another caller in the street was Winstone's icecream van, which at 4pm every Saturday set Bracelands ringing with the 'Blue Danube' on its chimes. It parked there for 20 minutes and was very popular.

A money-making opportunity that has disappeared from children's lives depended on glass bottles being returnable, when a deposit was refunded. We would collect as many as we could. Most were from Corona fizzy drinks. A van delivered these to Eastcombe Stores once a week, and would also stop in our cul-de-sac as some people had deliveries at home. We took the empties back to the Stores and received back the deposits. Even Domestos bottles were worth twopence. Beer bottles were worth threepence each, but returning those was more difficult. Landlord Ron Saunders seemed not to like our coming inside to the off-licence hatch – but after a bit of grumbling he would let us have the money.



The Lamb Inn

The Village Surgery

Doctors Hubert and Elizabeth Crouch lived in the house called The Triangle and ran their surgery from a building in the garden. Across the road from St Augustine's church, this was very convenient for local people.

Doctors Tim, Elizabeth and Hubert Crouch

Steps led from the road up into a waiting room, where there was bench seating for waiting patients. When your turn came you walked through into the other wing, where Dr Crouch had a leather couch for you to sit or lie on. My father said that a few times he lost his place in the queue as Doc Crouch said, 'Bill, could you go to the Stores and get me some Woodbines.' He rejoined the queue on return and when his turn came gave the cigarettes to the doctor. As I remember Hubert Crouch had an Irish accent and a calm voice. In those days it was your own doctor who made house calls day and night, and there was a surgery once a week in Bisley too. Dr Crouch always used a Land Rover, which was taken over by his son Tim at the same time as he took over the practice. Now Tim too is retired, and their surgery moved from the village many years ago. Are things better today? They are not as good, in my opinion.

Sunday School and Outings

On Sunday mornings we would always hear the church bell ringing at St Augustine's, so my sister Teresa and I would cut from the end of the cul-de-sac across the field to the church. Much shorter than going round by the road, this brought us out near the top wall of The Triangle, Dr Crouch's house, where there was a wide gateway with wooden posts. On Sundays, when nothing else was open, the little church was full.

We church children continued the long tradition of going to Bisley to attend the Ascension Day service and parade. All the villagers were encouraged to go to All Saints' by Revd Tom Gainey. The service finished with 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' and the parade would then proceed down the High Street to the wells, where the blessing would take place after decorating the stone structure with flowers. After this it was off to Bisley village hall for tea and cakes. On that day in the 1960s it nearly always rained!

St Augustine's Church was sold in 2022, and will become a house

Every year there was a Sunday School outing to Weston. At a time of no motorways, this involved a long journey, so on the day two green buses – arranged by Leslie and Lynda Roberts – would arrive by the church at 8am. Then we were off to Weston by the A38. At Bristol the highlight was going under the Clifton suspension bridge. We were all encouraged to sing songs like Ten Green Bottles and This Old Man... The high point of any year! Families took grandparents so we had our Nan Webb with us. She would always buy us something. Other friends, friends of my mother, would be there too – Jean Townsend and Billeen Shaylor, with all the kids. On arriving in Weston Leslie Roberts gave out instructions about the picking up point, and the time of 5pm, and not to be late. Most would head directly to the beach and pier. When it was time to go home Mr and Mrs Roberts checked their list so that no one was left behind. At that time they were the main organizers of most village events.

A Leyland Tiger bus, used for local journeys but also outings

Eastcombe Carnival Fête

This was the other high spot of the year. The parade always started just above the church. Leslie Roberts had a friend, Percy Stratford, who was the leader of of Chalford Silver Band – so he was always able to arrange for them to lead the parade. It always started with the same tune – there was a big bang boom and the parade moved off to the march 'Slaidburn.' This could be heard all over the village, as the parade went down past the church, along past the primary school, up past the Eastcombe Stores and then past Hilltop and our place up to the crossroads, over through the gate opposite and into the playing field. There the tents and stalls were already set up. Once in the band would play all afternoon, and other things like Punch and Judy, an icecream van, lots of attractions, brought people in from miles around.

Chalford Silver Band marching past Bracelands houses on the main road

On the parade behind the band were the efforts at fancy dress, followed by the floats. George Hinchcliff always built a design for a village queen float. He spent hours making it. I can remember people sitting on our wall to watch the parade go past, and then they followed it up the road.

It was around this time Dad decided he would make ginger beer. One night while we were all in bed we heard exploding bottles. He rushed downstairs to try and save what he could, but he had made too much. We heard him cursing as the bottles continued to explode. He never made any more.

Village Sport

Once I was asked by Mike Tanner, who lived in Fidges Lane, to play cricket for the village – so I gave it a go. On the day everyone was dressed in whites – but I had never had white flannels. We fielded first, and then when it came to batting I was put in at number 10. When I went in to bat Mike said 'Just block it, Paul.' Well, I had no intention of just blocking it, and smashed the first ball over the boundary, and did the same with the next

one. The third was high and hit me on the glove – and I was given out. Mike Tanner said 'You did all right, Paul' but I thought 'What sort of game is this when you can be given out for a ball hitting your glove?' John Vizor brought some secondhand cricket boots round to our house. He thought I would take it up but I decided not to play again and never did. Later I learned you can indeed get out for being hit on the glove – but it was not explained to me at the time.

Football was a different matter and we would often start a match on the playing field after school. We used our jumpers to make the goal mouths. Townsends, Gardiners, Baxters, Arkles, Martins, Perrinses, Davises, Pritchards were some of the locals who took part. Word got out and lads turned up from other villages. Nobody missed out. Each arrival would put his jumper down and join whichever team had fewer players. These games could end with 20 per side and were played till it got dark. It was such great fun that nobody kept count of the score.

Some played for Eastcombe, some for Chalford, I played for the Old Manorians who won the Stroud League five times but were never promoted to the northern senior league. The rules said each team had to have a home ground but we played on the Manor School pitch. I played up front a couple of times but never got a hat trick. My best goal was against Dursley in a last-minute cup match. Phil Baxter played centre back, Peter Townsend and Rob Gardiner played in midfield... Alan Baxter and Colin Dean played for Eastcombe.

Scouts and Guides

I was in the Scouts in the 60s and 70s. It was known as the Bisley group but at that time most of the members were from Eastcombe, particularly from Bracelands. We met once a week at the village hall and the leader who ran it was Bruce Gardine, an ex-army man who lived at Fennels Farm.

Some of the scout group near Eastcombe village hall in the 1970s

I remember that activities were quite wide-ranging, and on one away camp I learned to swim in the River Wye. The transport to go anywhere was an old army truck with benches in the back. The cab looked like Corporal Jones's lorry in 'Dad's Army.' Later, after we had raised funds, we changed to a Commer van. This was achieved by doing sponsored walks of 20 miles, always starting at Eastcombe and Bisley. The ones that finished in Eastcombe went to the village hall where food had been prepared by Mrs Clark, Mrs Shaylor, and my

mother. The Scouts also recycled newspapers which were collected mainly in Bisley but also in Chalford Hill and Bussage. This was done by taking turns in the evenings with the help of other adults such as Mr Wiseman from Bussage and Mr Sampson from Chalford Hill. Other events, very popular and successful, were auctions that took place four or five times a year. We went around collecting items with an old pram.

My older sister Teresa was in the Girl Guides, and later younger sister Debra was in the Girls' Brigade at Chalford Hill. A little story about Debra is that once when she was small she was on a tricycle outside our place, being pushed by another girl – and I was in the garden. I saw the tricycle go past the stone wall alongside the road by Hilltop. I was slow to react and Debra went down the road so fast that she crashed into the wall by Eastcombe Stores and broke her teeth. She could have been killed. I should have been more alert. On this same tricycle years before I broke my arm in a crash in 1964. After Debra's accident my father got rid of it.

Autumn in the Village

The autumn Church Harvest Festival was an annual celebration of the end of the growing season of the year, when food from crops would be donated – also even canned items – at the church service conducted by Revd Tom Gainey, helped by Leslie Roberts and his wife. We would go blackberry picking with our mother and some of our friends and their mothers (the Townsends, the Shaylors), across to Commercial Lane, filling all our containers. Many Eastcombe families were all doing this and we all knew what we would be eating for the next few weeks. Probably blackberry pie. We would also go down to Bismore and Hawkley, picking rosehips from the bushes in the hedgerows. They were used to make rosehip syrup.

Peter Townsend and I would go to favourite places to collect conkers. Some spots we knew were privately owned. There was a good conker tree at St Elizabeth's by the coach house – now turned into a house – and another place popular with most of us was a large tree on the boundary of Dr Crouch's garden. We kids would climb the wall and take them easily – I am sure the doc knew but did not mind.

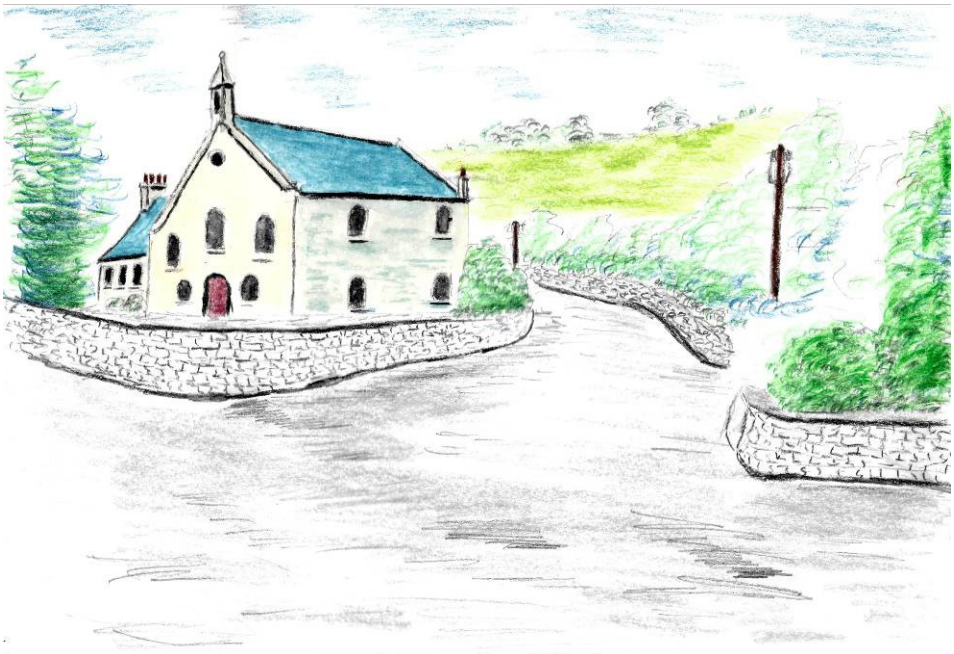
On one occasion Peter suggested we went to Bussage to a tree he had seen, so we walked over the Manor Farm fields as then it was much shorter. The tree was in the fields above The Ram and there was a path at the side of The Ram to the fields. We were doing really well with our picking, had bags full and were feeling really pleased with ourselves and about to leave. Up came a large gang of older kids and a fight was looking likely but what they wanted was our bags of conkers. There were too many of them for us to fight so we passed our pickings over and returned to Eastcombe empty-handed. I never forgot those boys and years later played football against some of them. Needless to say I gave them a hard time!

Peter and I worked at Nash End Farm for a time for pocket money. The farm was owned by Miss Wilby who kept Jersey cows and also two large bulls in a pen. We stopped going there when we both became unwell after using weedkiller spray in the fields at the bottom of Nash End lane.

Autumn turned into winter at or after the village bonfire on 5 November. This was built on the ground that lay between the end of our cul-de-sac and the village hall. It was of course arranged by Leslie Roberts and nearly everyone in the village was encouraged to drag or carry there anything that would burn. After a week or two heaps were building up on the field, and many a kid liked to climb up on these heaps, having fun. On the night itself the stuff was added to the burning fire until it was huge and could be seen for miles.

Our Schooling

My experience of school was not good. My older sister was already at the village primary school when I started, and found it okay, had no problem. The school was built next to the Baptist Church in the 1870s, for Baptist children, but became a council school – still with links to the chapel – after the First World War.



Eastcombe Baptist Church, with The Manse attached

One teacher, not to be named, was not good with certain boys including me, and there were unnecessary beatings which I did not like. After a while my mother decided this was no good, and set in motion the process of changing schools. I stayed away from school for weeks, but my sister continued a bit longer till we had places at Chalford Hill school. We were not the only ones from Eastcombe who went there; and certainly for me the result of having to change at that stage meant that I did not catch up to where I should be for years.

Another problem was that bullying started, being ganged up on was difficult – and after one episode my father said I had to learn to fight back but not all at once. As a Cardiff boy from a big city school he knew that you had to take on the bullies one at a time, that was the only way to stop them. So over the weeks I fought back one at a time till they stopped – but even after that there were some tormentors, and I still think the root of this was in my being behind at the start.

Incidentally, in those days all children were given a small bottle of milk to drink in the morning. I think this began with the poor growth of children in the war years and it was a way to make sure that the next generation did not suffer in the same way. The crates stood in the playground till the morning break – which gave the birds a chance to peck through the foil tops. The milk could go off in hot weather or freeze in cold; and when it froze the tops would pop up and the frozen cream would stand out of the bottle neck.

The headmaster of Chalford Hill school was Mr Morgan, and his wife was a teacher too. I did make many friends years later, and what helped was having my mother's parents living in the village. I developed tonsillitis which caused great pain, and later Dr Crouch arranged for me to have my tonsils removed in Stroud Hospital with an overnight stay.

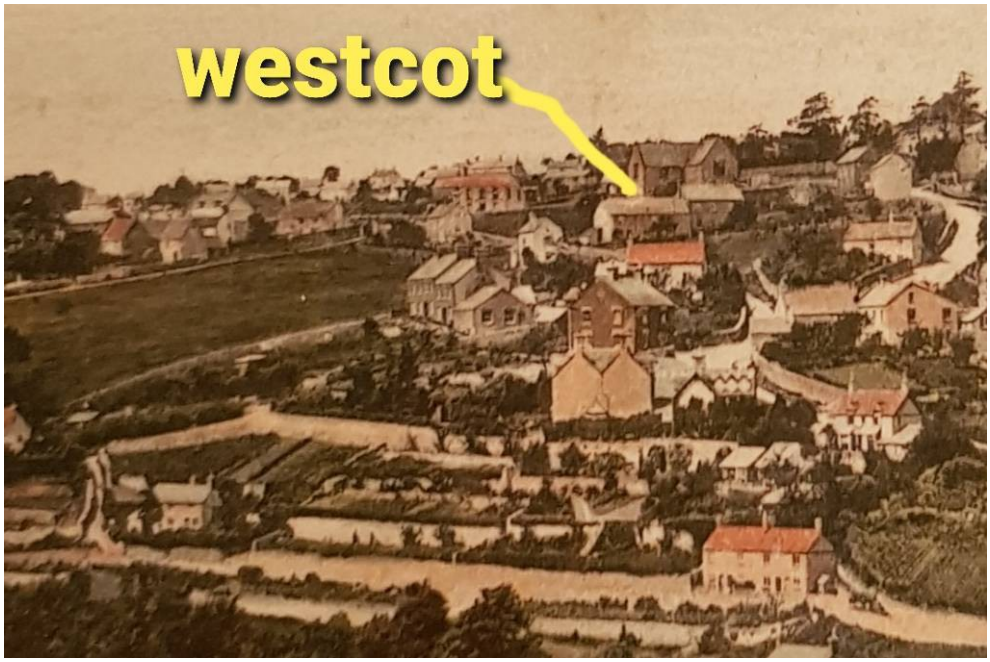
It was from this time that we developed the habit of going to Westcot after school. This helped form a great relationship with Grandfather Webb and our nan. By going to

Westcot twice a week my sister Teresa had made many friends in Chalford; also my mother had a few childhood friends still there. One was Jennifer David, and we got to know all her children very well. At one point they lived below Westcot so we visited a few times. Jennifer was a hairdresser so we always got a haircut. Later they moved and Grandfather, who used to cut hair in the navy, took on the task with me. But his idea was to put a basin on my head and cut round it (which is funny looking back).

We would walk to Chalford Hill school. At this time my sister moved on to secondary school in Stroud, but a neighbour, Joyce Young, got a job at Chalford Hill school. The walk had to be made in all weathers and past Duncan Young's Friesian herd at Middle Hill Farm. Coming back on the 426 bus meant passing the site of what became Fourways Garage. At that time Mr Higgins was digging out the ground there for the fuel tanks – by hand. The area had once been a quarry, and he had a hut on it,where he sold all kinds of things, sometimes more cheaply than Eastcombe Stores. There was a long cable that gave warning of cars arriving for fuel. Black-haired Mr Higgins was a big Yorkshireman who, very sadly, died suddenly – perhaps from the effort of all that digging. Nevertheless the garage was known as Higgins's and although there were no repairs done it continued to sell fuel and random items. My father got on very well with Mr Higgins, and sometimes came home with two different-flavoured chocolate bars which were always cut up and shared so that we got a taste of each.

In 1970 I moved on to Manor School, where many from Eastcombe went. Building this new school which replaced the Polytechnic at Brimscombe Port began in 1962. Its name was later changed to Thomas Keble, but a generation of locals knew it as the Manor. At that time it even had an outdoor swimming pool, but in the 1980s that was filled in as the running cost was too high. This caused some dissatisfaction locally: having originally aided in creating it and later having the use of it, Eastcombe people felt rather cheated or disappointed. The school was built on former fields of Manor Farm, next to the village recreation ground, and opposite the beginning of the row of houses that form the low numbers of Bracelands. Just one old house faced across the road, and this – St Mary's – had in the nineteenth century been a pub called The Bear Inn. After the pub closed the house was renamed The Firs, and later became St Mary's. Three new houses have just been built in the garden there. All this used to be the old Bisley Common, land which stretched from Chalford Hill to Bussage, down into Toadsmoor and Bismore, along to Bisley and across to Waterlane and Oakridge.

On the first day I walked to school with my friend Peter. In the years I passed there my favourite subjects were Geography and History, but I also liked Woodwork and Metalwork. Near the end of my time in school the workshop area went out of use, but we were asked if we wanted to have a full day every week, Friday, at a foundry at Cainscross. Surprisingly my friend Malcolm Ridler and I were the only two who wanted to do this, and we were keen. We had to be at Cainscross at 8.30am, which would have been difficult from Eastcombe but not from Chalford bottom. The 421 bus ran every 20 minutes to Standish. Malcolm lived in Chalford Hill and if I could get to Chalford too the journey would be possible. A cousin on my mother's side donated a pedal bike, a racer – the only problem being that it was in bits. This much older cousin had left it in a shed, dismantled, so in effect there was a frame, and bits. I could not afford to buy a bike, but I needed to get to Chalford and if I could get to the grandparents' house, Westcot, I knew I could leave the racing bike there during the day. I could walk from there down Rack Hill, meet Malcolm at the bus stop and take the 421 double decker to Cainscross.



Westcot viewed from Cowcombe Hill

Bill, my father, said he could rebuild my cousin's bike. One day all the bits turned up at Bracelands and he started mending. First he cleaned the frame and then painted it with four coats, by hand, in a mid-blue which looked brilliant when he had finished. Due to the thick paint it never chipped. Dad said to me 'This bike is much better than I imagined it would be, Paul. It has 10 gears.'

So now I had this bike, I could get to Westcot (my grandfather was always up at 6am anyway) and after wheeling the bike up the path and into his shed I had time for a cup of tea and a chat before going down Rack Hill to the bus stop opposite Chalford Chairs. There I met Malcolm Ridler. Rack Hill, by the way, was named after the cloth-drying racks where locally woven and red-dyed army uniform cloth used to be stretched to finish. On our return journey Malcolm would walk up Marle Hill and I went back up Rack Hill, and Grandfather would be looking out for me. On Fridays the family always went to tea at Westcot and we would catch up on the week's events.

Making Things

Malcolm and I went to the Cainscross foundry on Fridays and found a working world we had never seen. The machines there gave us the impression that we could make absolutely anything, and we found that it was also a training workshop for pattern makers learning about casting metal. I learned to use lathes for both metal and wood, made wooden patterns and cast a metal marking gauge, a hacksaw, and a cannon that would have fired if they had let me use brass for the barrel. I think they thought that would be too dangerous and made me use aluminium instead. I made a fruit bowl using dark and light wood, then turned on the lathe a biscuit barrel – but my biggest satisfaction was making a footstool for Grandfather who loved it. I still have it today.

Transport in Those Times

Buses ran through Eastcombe from Stroud, the destination on the front of the bus being France Lynch, with the number 426. The route came up Toadsmoor Road and Vatch Lane, past Bob Bingle's timber yard with trunks of trees on the side of the road piled higher than a double-decker bus. These piles spread right across to the Bussage road, The Ridge, above,

near the Coop shop which is now a house called Wind Whistle. Bob's bungalow was nearby.

The bus forked left into the village at the apex of The Triangle, along the street not yet named Dr Crouches Road, passed the primary school and Baptist church and then turned right up the Green. It stopped near the shop then continued uphill and turned right at the crossroads. There was a stop by Manor School and then the bus went on to Bussage, stopping at the Ram Inn. After that there was a stop at the Brownshill crossroads, and then Frithwood and across the top of Chalford Hill to the point house in France Lynch. It would return to town by reversing the route, running every hour. The buses were Leyland Tigers, with cabs separating drivers from passengers and conductors collecting the fares.

Most people did not have cars, so used the buses – and you never saw lines of parked cars in the village. We used the buses for trips to Stroud, sometimes for a treat such as the cinema, and some children used them to get to school.

The service was so good that our nan Annie used it to come to Eastcombe sometimes on Saturdays, returning easily to Chalford Hill when her errand was finished. There were no buses on Sundays – and shops were closed. Annie was a kind person who worked hard at two jobs. Once I was sent to a big house to help carry her bags. She shopped between jobs. That day I was shocked to see the huge pile of dishes left for her to wash. Did the owners never wash a plate? Until then I hadn't known that some people live like that.

Our Rural World

The great fields of Manor Farm were easily accessible on the edge of Eastcombe. From there we had unbroken views across to Minchinhampton and distant farms. On the way to Mother's parents in Chalford Hill she would avoid the direct road and walk us past Manor Farm on a direct path that led to Frith Wood and then via Abnash across Chalford Hill to Randalls Green. The fields were full of hundreds of skylarks then, a sound and sight I shall never forget. They would rise from their nests almost at our feet and go up singing high into the sky. One particular summer, 1967, stays in my mind forever.

During the long break from school I was in the top field at Manor Farm and from near the last stone barn I saw a huge bright yellow combine harvester, hired to cut the wheat. I watched the first field being cut and then followed it to the second field. The driver stopped and beckoned me over. He said 'Lad, do you want to come up the ladder?' 'Yes please, sir,' I replied. 'Okay, hold the side of the ladder and come up. Want to have a go with me cutting the field, lad?' 'Yes, sir, thank you.' 'Well, you sit on that box. I saw you watching, this is going to be much more fun for you. See that lever with the red knob, when I say, lad, you pull it up. Okay?' 'Yes,sir,' I replied; and we set off. I pulled the lever as instructed and all the front blades lifted up while still rotating. On the end was a projecting metal object and I could see the driver was using that to line up for cutting. 'Okay, lad, let the lever down,' so I did, and we were cutting – first around the edge of the field twice. I could see this was to give him room for turning the great machine.

As we neared the cutting line the driver would say 'Lift the lever... Now down, lad' and we were cutting. At the end of each line he gave the same instructions, rounding the harvester in a loop to approach the return line then saying 'Okay lad.'

As we cut foxes and hares ran out of the long grass as the great machine approached. The driver said hares could run at over 40mph. He smiled as we completed cutting the field and asked my name. 'Right, Paul, you're doing ok. Want to stay and do the rest/' 'Yes sir,' I replied. 'Right. I'm stopping for lunch now. Be back at 1.30, and don't tell your mates. Right?'

Manor Farm fields and skylarks with the path straight to Frith Wood and beyond

I went home and told my mother, nobody else. She said the man sounded ok and I was to listen to what he said, for safety. I had a sandwich and was back on time. 'Right,' he said, 'No time to waste. You know what to do, so let's go to it.' Field after field we cut, over to Bussage, and I noticed The Ram below us at one point. I knew that the landlord's son, Roy Bingle, learnt to ride a motorcycle on the Manor Farm fields (when there was no crop to damage) as he had access from behind the pub... Every now and again when the combine was full the driver pulled over to a waiting tractor and trailer. A side pipe swung over and the grain rattled through it, filling the trailer.

Over the next few days we cut over as far as Frith Wood and when we were about to cut the last two, alongside the road running up from Abnash, someone new turned up at the edge of the field. 'Just ignore him, Paul, I'm not doing this with anyone else.' We carried on and it was mid-afternoon when it was all done. The driver seemed to me almost like an uncle. It was time to leave and that driver said, 'You'll never forget this, Paul.' And he was right. I never did. I never saw him again, either. But even today, with those fields covered with houses, I can picture how it was then, and feel so lucky to have had that experience.

Another favourite pastime was fishing. We would get up very early and go down to Toadsmoor Lake [at that time there was just the one lake, alongside the woodsman's cottage now known as Keeper's Cottage, Toadsmoor.] Peter Townsend was crazy about fishing, and he would spend time in his garden, practising casting weights. Sometimes his brother Nick was with us. On the was down we would stop at Pollards' farm in Bismore. Peter said red worms were the best bait, and he had permission from Mr Pollard to dig in the dung heap where it was easy to find them. It was always Peter who caught the fish, I could only catch eels – sometimes very large ones.

In the 1960s the lake had a wooden punt always tied up near the track bridge of the overflow stream. Back then the bridge was made of wooden sleepers. Sometimes we would take the punt out on the lake, which was great fun. We went all over, even to the

channels through the reeds in the inflow area. Peter continued fishing the lake in later years, staying there all night sometimes, until Mr Scott left the lakekeeper's house. These days there is fencing round the lake, but back then there was no obstruction.

Working

I had a choice of jobs. I could go into pattern-making for casting metal objects; or I could work for a stone company based at a quarry near The Camp as my mother had arranged an interview at Imperial House in Stroud. I took the stone company option as I wanted to work outside. Sometimes the foundry at Cainscross got very hot!

Freemans was an old-established stoneworks where many local people were employed. One from Eastcombe was Patrick Driscoll, who was also from Bracelands. We called him Paddy, and his wife was Mary, from Oakridge. Like our family, they too were first occupiers of their newly built Bracelands house. We were picked up every day by a dark blue Freemans van, at 7am. Jack West from France Lynch drove the van, and picked people up from Chalford and Bisley. I remember Cyril Dean, Jim Stevens, Mike and George Hale, Roger Stevens, Paul Hemmings, Jim Brunston – and the contracts manager, Derrick Shergold who lived next to Chalford Hill School.

I worked on projects at Gyde Orphanage, Painswick; Brasenose and St John's Colleges, Oxford; Glastonbury rural museum – but my first weeks were spent working at the quarry. Later I worked on the Winchester Cathedral cloisters, using the largest stone tiles I had ever seen. Some were the size of table tops, taking several men to lift them. Apprentices in those days could be treated very badly. While I was working at Oxford there was an example of this. When stone tiles were removed the lime torching, that sealed the back of the tiles, would fall off to the joists below. There were tons of this stuff on this particular roof, one of the largest roofs ever replaced at Oxford. It was the apprentices who were given the task of picking this mortar up and putting it in a bucket while crawling along a plank maybe 60 or 70 feet under the structure in a very enclosed area. As soon as you picked up the stuff it crumbled and the only protective mask was a handkerchief. By the end of the day you were black with dust. One apprentice, Gary Mutton, quit his job because of this. I got breaks because of travelling every two weeks to Birmingham training centre.

In 1978 Freemans were taken over by Elmers, a large company from London with very little idea of working with stone. They employed Londoners unqualified in stone work, which caused the jobs to fail. I left Elmers soon after they took over as they seemed to be moving in the wrong direction, and doomed. Indeed, they did go bust later.

Two other significant things happened in 1978. My sister Teresa got married at Bussage church, with a reception at the Kings Head in France Lynch. And I learnt to drive, which made a difference to me and my family – and proved important in my next job. I started at Orchard and Peer, also a stone company, based at Bowbridge near Stroud. They still kept high standards doing stone work in the right way. The contracts manager was Don Butt from Chalford Hill. When the chargehand retired I was promoted to his place, to my surprise. I remember working with a plumber named Archie Verender. After a while he got used to me and we formed a friendship. Eventually I found the courage, while having lunch with him, to ask about the unusual scars on his face. Archie replied that he was in the Gloucesters during the war, and took part in the withdrawal from Dunkirk. He said that they were in the rear guard, their boat was sunk. 'I was lucky I got out.' No more was said.

The End of My Youth, My Lost World

My grandfather Webb, so significant in my youth, died in October 1981. Westcot cottage

felt strange without him, and nothing could be the same again there. The following month we started work on the church with a spire above Stroud Hospital, and after the Christmas break the weather became extremely cold.

Snow at Fourways near Eastcombe in January 1982

On 7 January 1982 we were hit by blizzards that lasted more than 34 hours. I tried to walk from Bracelands to Stroud but had to turn back. We could not get out of the village for more than a week. After a few days the stores ran out of bread, so Peter Townsend and I set off with bags in search of more. The drifts were frozen, the going was easier, so we were able to get over to Chalford. We got enough bread for the Beers, Townsends, Youngs, and Davises. At the same time I went to Westcot and dug my Nan Annie out. That winter we had the most snow falls I remember.

Quite a bit of building happened in Eastcombe after Bracelands and Manor School: I am thinking of Brockley Acres, the last part of Bracelands, Fourwinds, Sylvanus, Pine Hill, Buchan Major, The Lindens and so on. Infill house-building is still going on.

My father died quite recently and his house was sold. My little story ends in March 1982 when I moved to Stroud, leaving behind the lost world of my youth in Eastcombe.

Paul Beer and his parents, Pat and Bill