

Denis Stratton remembers

I was born on the 7th of October at Wisteria Cottage in Shrivenham on the Faringdon Road. I was one of seven children and I lived there until the mid 1920's when we moved to Park Cottages. Behind us there was open parkland belonging to the Barrington family and this was where the village Fete took place each year in July when Lord and Lady Barrington welcomed everyone from the village. It was a wonderful Fete with huge steam engines. Lord Barrington was a real gentleman and was at ease with everyone he met. He was both liked and respected. The Barringtons, whose estate covered most of the village, gave the Memorial Hall and the Rec to be used for social functions together with the eight disabled ex-servicemen's houses for the benefit of injured Shrivenham people returning from active service in WW1. Lady Barrington had campaigned tirelessly for money from her musical and artistic friends in London so that she could fund this project. When the Memorial Hall was first opened there was no Bar allowed and in addition, no dogs or cyclists were allowed in the Rec. The village cricket team played in the Rec, there was football, too, and also two 6 - a - side hockey teams.

At this time my grandfather lived in the middle of the row of the original Almshouses in Claypits Lane. His rent then was one shilling a week. It was a one up one down dwelling with steep and narrow stairs leading from a corner in the living room. It had a lean-to kitchen at the back. It had a slate roof but years ago it had been thatched.

My grandfather had been in the old Anglo-Afghan war and had been forced to march 300 miles from Kabul to Kandahar through mountainous country in 1880 under the command of General Roberts. Not all his colleagues survived that. Incidentally, my grandfather was the last resident to vacate the old Almshouses, which were about to be replaced in Marten's Road. He died in 1946. None of the cottages had piped water and every house had its own well for Shrivenham was well supplied with underground water. At our cottage we had a huge tank outside with pipes attached serving 2 dwellings. These were to collect rainwater with which my mother would fill the copper and heat it to do the washing for the 9 of us. In order to supplement my father's wages to help feed the 7 children my mother, Florence Stratton, used to take in washing from the gentleman who lived in Coplow House, Dr Pratt. I remember how she used to starch and iron his shirts to perfection. She would carefully iron the cuffs and collars saying you could only get them white with a real good boil. There was, of course, no electricity then. The irons were heated in the fire and the temperature gauged by a quick spitting on the hot base of the iron. We had oil lamps to light the cottage. At that time my father was a postman and he earned 28 shillings a week; the rent then was 4/6d. Interestingly agricultural workers earned 30 shillings a week but only paid rent of 3/6d a week. We moved up to Stallpits Road in 1933. My mother originally came from Barrow-in-Furness in Lancashire. Her family had moved around a lot before they settled in Shrivenham and so by 1913 she had

had very little schooling. However, she learned to read and write in the tiny schoolroom in the Churchyard. There were one or two children with what we call special needs today and they were given extra lessons in this schoolroom on their own. My mother was fairly quick and soon benefited from this tuition.

At right angles to our cottage was a larger building. It was used as a stable for Charlie Ford's shire horse together with the roller the horse was hitched to when Charlie used to cut the grass in the Rec. Charlie was the full time caretaker of the Rec and he himself lived in the first house in the Rec close to the Highworth Road. The Rec looked a little bit different from how it looks today for there used to be flowerbeds cut out and these were beautifully cared for. There was also a bowling green; it was where the children's playground is today. There used to be a cottage for the Head Gardener of the Barrington estate and it had orchards behind it stretching down the Longcot Road. It was diagonally opposite our cottage. It was pulled down in the 1930's when the War Department bought the Barrington estate. However the house that was built adjacent to the Gardener's, but nearer the Loncot Road is still there today. A Mr Ferryman occupied it. He was the agent for Lord Butler who lived at Pinewood in Bourton. Everyone admired Mr Ferryman's model T Ford car that of course, was black. Up against the garage doors where he kept his car was a concrete apron on which we had our own wicket - we called it the concrete wicket. It may have been Lord Barrington's influence since he played regularly for the village team. For a cricket ball we used one of those very hard wooden balls from a coconut shy. Another of our activities as young children was to play our whips and tops down the length of the High St. There were very few cars on the road then which meant we just to one side when a rare vehicle came and then continued our game.

The best pub in Shrivenham was the Barrington Arms run by Ted Chambers, father of Alec Chambers. There was a mounting block just outside for horses, well their riders, outside the pub and it stood there until the late 1960's. The Cross Trees opposite the Barrington Arms was where the farmers congregated with their pony and traps when they came to Shrivenham. We lads at this time took great delight in hiding ourselves in the hollow tree there whose wood was becoming very crumbly. We would keep quiet and then suddenly fling our garnerings at the farmers. They always knew we were there and with a roar of unprintable language bellowed at us.

At this time in the 1930's, Shrivenham was a village of box hedges. They were everywhere and ran along the side of the old A420 from Swan Hill, past the allotments, in front of the old Police station and then along Townsend Road. They were outside the Memorial Hall and then ran along the High street and in front of the two cottages pulled down to make way for the Co-op and today's row of shops. In one of the cottages where the DIY shop now stands lived Tommy Moss. Next door to him lived Mrs Margetts. The land belonging to Maytree Cottage in Manor Lane extended to the High Street. When some of the land was sold and the two cottages pulled down there was

a covenant placed to forbid any building more than one storey high so that the previous owner of the land could retain his view over to the Downs. In 1960, (not certain) the cottages were taken down to make way for the Co-op and a Pharmacy.

Altogether in Shrivenham eleven thatched cottages were demolished including the delightful ones in Hazell's Lane. In their place 6 modern bungalows were built in the 1960's. We also lost 3 big barns. One was the well known "Knapps Diary" barn, removed to make way for the houses in Catherine Close. A lovely old stone barn was removed from the schoolyard when some alterations were done to the school. It stood behind the school close to Manor Lane. The 3rd was almost opposite the entrance to Manor Close today, nearer the Rec, but where the cars are now parked in the school grounds. Years ago on the right-angled bend in Manor Lane stood a lovely thatched house, which was pulled down. I remember Fred Tucker from the Blacksmith's cottage opposite the Co-op. He owned a fair amount of land. In the 1930's we had 2 butchers - Mr Yeates had his shop where the Pharmacy is today, and later taken over by the Hursts, Mr Harris was the other butcher and his shop was next to the Barrington Arms.

I started school when I was 5 and remained at Shrivenham School until I was 14. Mr Dickie Dance was the Head teacher and everyone respected him for the disciplinarian that he was. He was also a fair man. Before the War there was no school milk for the children. Watchfield School by this time had closed down and any Watchfield children came to Shrivenham - the younger ones travelled in a covered wagon while the older ones had to walk. At school the boys went to Bourton for woodwork each Monday. The Watchfield boys went on Tuesday. The waggon took us but we had to get out at the steep bridge by the Victoria as the horse couldn't manage to pull us all up.

Something that sticks in my memory when I was about 7 years old was when the silent films used to be shown in the Memorial Hall. I recall that us lads and by that I mean my friends the Mildenhall brothers, young Ted Hambridge as well as us Strattons used to stand and watch the people who could afford to pay to go in and watch the silent pictures. One day Mr Wilson who lived in Ivy House noticed us and paid for us to go in. What a benefactor. By the time we got to the 1930's the Depression was making its mark felt everywhere. As a 9 year old I remember going to Mr Freeth's house in Stallpits Road and every day I would pump up water from his well into a tank for their use indoors. For this I was paid 1/- a week that is 5 pence in today's money . Then, a shilling was a lot of money and I used to first of all buy a few sweets and I felt very rich.

Later on when schoolboys were about 12 years old there was another source of income if you were lucky. Miss Dike who later became Mrs Moon would pay 6d a week to the boys who used the builder's cart to move goods to and from the shop Dike's Stores, and to other locations in the village. This job was

handed down from one boy to another at school. The Reading Room was a centre for us lads and the men of the village. There was a screen dividing the Room into 2 sections. The under 16s were on one side and the over 16s were on the other side. Here we played cards. Among the adults there I remember Mr Vickie Dance our Headmaster and Sergeant Lyford playing Bridge and Chess. Sergeant Lyford was very good and used to play Bridge for the county. The Police Station was well manned then and there were several policemen who lived in the Police houses in Shrivenham.

As a boy I went swimming in the Stew on the Barrington estate. There were no fish there as the locks kept the fish out – the Barrington family and friends also used the Stew for swimming, it was their swimming pool. However, when the locks were open we lads used to stand in the water having stripped to our underpants in order to catch the fish. We would then fling them on to the bank and later take them home for cooking. Usually they were pike. Another place that we lads used to go fishing was in the large pond at the bottom of the Vicarage garden as it then was. It is now part of Canon Hill's Gardens. Canon Metford was the Vicar then and my Dad used to do his garden. I remember his lovely orchard with its beautiful apples. I'm sure Mr Metford, who was a very tall man 6 feet 6 inches I was told - used to turn a blind eye to us as we went in through the gate at the bottom and started to fish in the pond that was full of fish. I remember Mr Metford always used to visit all the sick people and any in trouble in the village. There used to be another Vicar in Watchfield, a Mr Lowe. He was another tall man. I do remember the former Vicar, Canon Hill. A group of us at the village school made a waste paper basket for him and one day we took it over to the Vicarage. Canon Hill was pleased with it and thanked us for it. I remember him in his long black cassock and wearing gaiters. I was about 10 years old when he died. My father used to keep the churchyard tidy and I remember we always used to scrub Canon Hill's tombstone and keep it clean out of respect for him.

As soon as I left School in 1937 I was out to work. My first job was as a gardener at Stanton Fitzwarren House. I used to bike there and back 6 days a week and I hated it, but I earned 10 shillings a week, that is 50 pence in today's coinage. I decided that as I hated my gardening job so much I would look for another. Vickers was just getting established at South Marston so I went to ask. They didn't need anybody for any job but kindly pointed me in the direction of a hut where labour was needed. I was taken on at £4 .10 shillings a week to help build air raid shelters. I then told my employer at Stanton Fitzwarren House. They were millionaires by the name of Dukas and did not want to lose my labour. They offered me a rise of 3 shillings a week but I was adamant I was going. I enjoyed my work and later was paid the man's rate of £10 a week. I have to say that when I first started there it gave me extreme pleasure to give my father £1.10 shillings from my first wage packet. To illustrate the value of money I recall that some of my friends who worked in Swindon when they first left school instead of taking the bus costing 7d each way, would cycle to the station and take the train, which cost

11d return. I also remember the 17-gallon milk churns that would be taken to the station from the various farms in the district and loaded on to the train. I used to like walking up Church Walk especially in the winter. The shop at the bottom then was called Pounds Stores and it was a bakery. There were ovens all the way along the walk and the heat was lovely when you stood against the wall. It was also another source of income for some of us - the coke to fire these ovens needed to be shovelled in frequently.

The other things I remember just at the start of the war was Tom Dike, the undertaker, who had his workshop where the new vicarage is today just behind the garage. Electricity came to Shrivenham in 1936/1937 and we actually had 4 street lights: at Horne's corner, outside the Barrington Arms, the High St junction with Ashbury Rd, now Stainswick Lane. I remember the battery radio was thrown out when electricity came. We just plugged into the mains and we had an aerial. The village was well supplied with water, which was drawn from the criss cross of waterways that lie beneath the village. Each house and cottage had its own well and certainly we at Stallpits road were connected to the sewerage system before the war but we did not have running water in the house. It was a matter of great wonder when the east side of Shrivenham was connected to the mains just before the war. The village was about 600 people then and it was not until after the war that the west side of the village went on stream. In my childhood and youth there were no fridges. The way we kept our butter, milk and other perishables in hot weather was to wrap them in a cloth in a bucket and lower them into the well. They kept cool there.

On a far more basic note a few words about sewage. Previously, we had had no bathrooms in the cottages and the privy was outside at the bottom of the garden. We needed a candle if we needed to visit the privy in the middle of a dark night. It then ran into an 18foot deep trench, which ran down Hazell's lane to the sewage farm on the Longcot road. My father was one of the men who had excavated this trench. Later in life he lived in the adjoining house to us on the High St. We moved into one of the Lady Barrington Trust houses for disabled ex-servicemen in 1952. We had a huge garden. It still had a pillbox in it, a relic from the War. My father lived there for 35 years. He had been shot through the legs in the battle at Ypres. He made no fuss about it but it must have pained him when he worked at the quarry in Watchfield. Not exactly light work. In those days each labourer had to provide his own tools and I remember my father riding about on his bicycle with his own pack and shovel.

Other childhood memories are of Mr Collins who lived in the High Street. He was a keen footballer and regularly took us over to Uffington in his old car when we had a match. Mr Tucker was the blacksmith and lived in Blacksmith's cottage. Sadly, I remember him as rather tight-fisted and there was talk of him doing dubious deals when the Americans were here in the village and he ended up in prison. Other wartime memories are of the Wellington bomber that crash-landed in Shrivenham between 2 trees in

Stallpits Road by Tom Forrest's pig farm. My sister kept a small piece of the Perspex from the plane for many years. One of the saddest memories was when Billie Benford, Frank Benford's brother, was accidentally shot by his colleague early one evening as they were keeping guard outside the main gates to the College or what was then the Barracks. The whole village was stunned by his death. We were aware of WW11 in many ways in Shrivenham. For instance Nina Buckland's husband was held as a prisoner of war in Japan.

In 1942 I decided to join the Navy. I started off with a gang at Cambridge and after our initial training we went to Pwelhi in Wales. Our camp was the Butlin's Holiday Camp during the War and we completed our training before joining HMS Bazely which was on lease/lend to Britain from the USA. I had joined for "Hostilities only" along with several others. One day we were summoned and told of the advantages of being an Able Seaman. I did not want to make the Navy my career but studied for the tests. When I passed these tests instead of getting 2/- a day my pay rose to 3/- a day. When I went to sea I spent all my time on the North Atlantic convoys. I was aware of the dangers and very thankful that we had radar. I recall the First Lieutenant, Jimmy the One, as he was known. He was the Honourable David Sealey, very strict and did not ask anyone to do anything that he would not do himself. For example, there were 2 or 3 boats near us with the aim of shooting a U-boat. We were using "hedgehogs" not depth charges. We hit the U-boat and the Captain actually went into the water, freezing cold, on a heaving line to pick up any body parts as proof. I was at sea when my grandfather died and it was a pity because not only have I missed him but he had promised to leave me all his medals. When I got back to the village in 1947 everything had been cleared up. At that time the Military College of Science was re-grouping at Shrivenham and I was the first person to join the Fire Station there. It was the best job I ever had. 1947 was a turning point for me. I got married and later that year my wife and I moved into the house next door to my father's. Both houses were Barrington Trust houses for ex-servicemen. Later in life, I decided to operate my own business and I had a market stall. I'd always been interested in linens and materials and as my wife ran a haberdashery shop in the village we worked as a team. However, I was only interested in the top quality stuff.