

## Memories of Margaret Coppock Mayers

*Margaret Coppock grew up at 4 New High Street, Headington in the 1920s and 1930s and emigrated to Canada just after the Second World War. She now lives in Pennsylvania*

I probably spent a couple of years at Miss Steff's school: I can vaguely remember sitting in a little shed off to the right side of the house. I don't recall the name of the lady who taught us, but I vividly remember writing on slates with chalk and being taught how to knit. I was given yellow wool, and we were shown how to do plain stitches. After doing a few rows we stopped for the day, and the next day we resumed: however I had forgotten to put the wool around the needle and just kept transferring the stitches to the other needle: thank goodness the teacher came to my aid and put me on the right track again. Some weeks later, our project was finished: the teacher lined the piece of knitting with green silk, folded it over and sewed up the sides, leaving a flap, sewed on a button and made a loop and, lo & behold, there was a purse, which I was allowed to take home: it was a bit grubby, but Mom loved it. After that, Mom taught me to do plain & purl and later on more advanced stitches. I've loved to knit ever since, making clothes for my dolls and later on lots of Barbie clothes for my five daughters' dolls.

Mom would come to take me home after school, and at least once a week we would go the extra little way down Dunstan Road to the Cemetery where my Father is buried (he died March 13th 1928, when I was six months old). On the way home we would stop at a bakery on the corner of St Andrew's Road for freshly baked bread, also stopping at one of the thatched cottages on St Andrew's Road to visit a friend of my Mother's. (I fell in love with thatched cottages at that time, and photograph dozens of them on my trips back "Home" now.) During the war as a teenager I would ride down on my bicycle to the bakery, and if the bread wasn't ready I would continue on to the Cemetery, visit my Dad's grave, then go on over to the right and sit on the stile overlooking the fields beyond; sadly now the fields have been turned into a housing development.

As a child I remember my brothers and I going down the lane past the Cemetery, crossing over the bypass, and going across the fields: there was a stream where my brothers would fish for minnows and I would pick wildflowers for Mom.

I next went to a private school, run by a Mr & Mrs Ward at their home at 33 Old High Street (they were musicians and artists). The house is still there, on the right-hand side coming from London Road. We were taught the three R's along with music, art, and French, and long nature walks were included. One of the subjects we were taught was art, which I really liked very much: we had an art lesson every day, and two that I completed (both seascapes) I was allowed to take home. I was really excited about them, Mom was very pleased and lovingly kept them for me, and I still have them. Another pupil at the school was Faith Stow who lived in Old High Street, a little further down the road from No. 33. I also discovered a couple of years ago that my best friend from Central School Margaret Dexter (nee Bolt) also went to the Ward's for music lessons. After Mom discovered the long amount of time spent on nature walks with the Wards, when I was about 8½ she sent me to Margaret Road School,

which was probably the best thing for me, as about three years later I won a scholarship to Oxford Central Girls' School.

The classrooms at Margaret Road School were co-educational, but barely, girls on one side of the room and boys on the other, our playgrounds were separated by a rather high wall, sometimes the boys would hoist each other up to try to get a peek at the girls, There were three choices at lunchtime: go home, bring something from home, or go up to the senior school where for a few pennies one could buy a really tasty meal.

Our street, New High Street, was quite a hodge-podge of different styles of homes, with a number of businesses at our upper end. On the corner of London Road and New High Street, opposite the Pub, was a haberdashery & drapery store: Mom was quite an accomplished needlewoman, so we were in there a lot, and I still have some of the packets of pins we were given instead of a farthing change. A bit farther down was the shop run by the Mrs & Miss Rogers: they were great friends of my Mother. There were greengrocery items on one side of the shop, and sweets and cigarettes on the other, a couple of tables for tea, and upstairs they ran a catering business mostly wedding receptions, parties, and some dinners. We were the recipients of jars of beef 'drippings' from the roast beef, and also sundry other delicious left-overs. Mrs Rogers' husband was a navy officer, and so was gone from home a great deal. If Mom had to go out before we got home from school, she would leave our front-door key with Mrs Rogers for us, who always gave us a tasty treat.

The Cinema was next: we visited that on occasion, not too often because money was a bit scarce after my Father died in 1928. We went a bit more often as we got older, and Mr Hall would let my brothers in via the back door sometimes on Saturday afternoons. It was quite handy living practically across the street, as we could take turns waiting in line, especially in wartime when the lines were quite long.

There was a little shop next to the Cinema which changed hands many times: the only one tenant I remember was during the war, when they sold faggots and peas: you had to bring your own bowl for them. Actually the faggots were quite tasty, I don't know what they were made of, probably just as well!!!

Mr & Mrs Abbey ran the fish & chip shop across from us: they were a lovely couple, who had one son Tommy: he was ill quite often, and was a great friend of my brother Eric. I remember there was a little booth in a kind of cubby hole in the shop. Mrs Abbey would tell my brother to come over after the cinema crowd had dispersed for, as she put it, "some bits of fish for the cat". It was always a huge package of fish & chips, and some large pieces of uncooked fish: of course the cats didn't get much of it!!. People were awfully good to us. Mr & Mrs Abbey had a small caravan parked in the cinema lot, and on Sundays they would take it and go on a two-day trip, as the shop never opened on Mondays. It was rather sad when, one Monday night during the war, Mr & Mrs Abbey had gone to the cinema down town, and upon leaving in the blackout, Mr Abbey stepped off the kerb into the path of a military vehicle and was killed. The store was never opened again, and a few years later Tommy passed away.

I can't recall the names of other people across the street, but there was a larger house a bit further down the street lived in by a couple named Baker and their two

daughters. Mr Baker<sup>1</sup> worked at the University. Then there were a lot of smaller houses until the corner of East Street [now Bateman Street]. I recall going down there for sweets (pre-war). About once a week Mom gave us a penny for sweets, and my brothers and I took turns going down there to choose our sweets. I recall Ron coming home with red hots which I detested, so on my turn I picked out some candy shaped like pork chops, potatoes, and peas (to use in my dolls' house). Eventually Ron and I compromised, and we would get some of each - the things you remember!

Now further on down the street on that side, right at the bottom, was an empty lot where a gypsy caravan was parked: we were not allowed to go down there, but did risk a peek or two when Mom wasn't with us.

On our side, of course, was the Royal Standard public house on the corner; then came No. 2, where a family named Hathaway lived during the war (they intended to emigrate to Australia later on). Then came our house, No. 4, where my brothers and I were born. Mom & Dad had started making the property over into income-producing units: the front of No. 4 was turned into two shops: a beauty parlour on the side next to No. 2, and a lock-up shop on the other side. I believe that the first tenant named the shop "Doris", and the other side had a variety of tenants: part of our drawing room was taken over for this shop. At the side of No. 4 a modern flat was constructed with two shops downstairs: these had small rooms behind and a toilet and washbasin. The flat was lovely, but the problem was that 1928 onwards was depression time, so tenants were few and far between.

My Father died when construction was half done, leaving Mom with a heavy mortgage and no income except a small widow's pension, so things were pretty tight. We struggled along for years, Mom had to contend with non-paying tenants and those who would pack up and leave for parts unknown.

When the war came, anything empty was taken over for evacuees from London: windows of the shops were whitewashed over, cots put in, and then came the sad trickle of evacuees. A London family came and luckily rented the beauty parlour: they were displaced beauticians, and our shop was made to order: they called the shop Ray-Raies. Marie, Ray's sister tried to do a make-over on me, a willing 13-year-old: Mom soon put a stop to that, but she would let them wash and curl my hair occasionally.

They stayed most of the war years, then returned to London, and a new London family came and rented the two shops in front of the house: they employed local ladies to do piece-work covering coat hangers. Meanwhile the evacuees in the flat really trashed the place, and put coal in the bathtub instead of the provided bin: what a mess! It took Mom a long time to get it all straight, with no payment from the government to cover the damages. Mom was eventually able to rent out the flat, but the shops remained empty for some time.

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<sup>1</sup> John Norman Leonard Baker was Fellow & Tutor in Geography at Jesus College, and Lord Mayor of Oxford in 1964. He lived at Stone Rise (11–13 New High Street) from 1928 to about 1950, and his daughter, who grew up there and attended Headington School, became Baroness Young, who died in September 2002

After all the evacuees left, the war being over, and I had emigrated to Canada to await the rest of my family's arrival, a dry cleaners and pick-up company rented the former beauty parlour and shop next door, and eventually the owners purchased the property from my mother before she left for Canada to join my brother and myself (Eric was still in the service as a paratrooper).

To go back a bit, to describe how No. 4 looked when we lived there: there was a beautiful garden behind the property, many fruit trees, a large lawn and a smaller one, beautiful flower beds, a large evergreen tree, rose bushes, a small brick summer house, and a large garage with loft where my brother kept his variety of pets. There was a pig sty at the rear of the garage, and a small hut where a goat was kept when my father was alive: it was for the small cart to take my brother Ron for rides when he was small. After my father died, Mom sold the cart and goat.

Where Alison Clay House is now, there was a beautiful home owned by the de Beers<sup>2</sup> family: they had a beautiful garden and many lovely fruit trees. Garden parties were frequently held there and I would look out of my bedroom window (now bricked over) and watch the partying and listen to the music. My brothers would occasionally throw their balls over the wall by accident, and when they went around to ask for permission to get the ball, the maid would often give the boys fruit to bring home. At the beginning of the war, we were told that the de Beers were interned and the property was now occupied by a Lord Balfour & family. Lord Balfour could be seen going off to his allotment with spade and rake over his shoulder almost every day, and he would frequently drop off vegetables for us.

I was shocked to see the back garden of my former home No. 4 when I returned a few years ago: it was now a gravelled-over parking area. The French windows and steps down to the garden gone, all the flowers, beautiful trees, and fruit trees all gone: I cried when I saw it, and was sorry I had gone around back and seen the changes.

After the war from 2 January to the end of March I was employed at Headington Hill Hall as a civilian attached to the Army Pay Corps. I worked for Staff Sgt. Cyril Day as a typist. I really enjoyed my time there, and everyone was so nice to me. We took a morning and afternoon tea break, and when the weather was pleasant, as it was in March, we sat on the balcony and enjoyed the fresh air. Quite a number of Italian prisoners of war were used to work around the grounds of Headington Hill Hall, and they were quite clever at making ships in a bottle: they would make one for a packet of cigarettes. I had one made, it's gorgeous, I still have it, it's very unusual: a lovely town on the side of mountains has been positioned on the back inside of the bottle (which has four flat sides): I've always wondered if the Italian who made it lived in an area similar to the one he placed in the bottle. A battleship fills the centre of the bottle.

My uncle, Philip Morgan, ran a grocery store in Lime Walk [Nos. 65 & 67] during the First World War. He was married to my mother's sister Maud Boffin, and they had

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<sup>2</sup> Gavin Rylands de Beer was a Fellow of Merton College and Lecturer in Zoology and Comparative Anatomy.

two children, Beatrice Yvonne and Phyllis. Beatrice Yvonne died of pneumonia at the age of six, and is buried a short distance from my father in the cemetery near Dunstan Road. Some years later my uncle sold the store and moved to Gloucester with my Aunt Maud and Phyllis.

I vividly remember shopping at Mr. Scholefield's little shop in New High Street [No. 24]: he sold everything you could want there. Mostly we went there for bread, salt (in a big block), sugar, and tea - basically things we ran out of when the Co-op was closed (pre-war). He was very nice and would always sell us a loaf of bread at the back door on Sunday (I guess that was probably a no-no in those days)

There was another little shop a bit closer to us than Mr Scholefield's: it had a bay window and sold mostly sweets & cigarettes [No. 18]. I don't remember anything further down except the Methodist chapel where the Sons of Temperance meetings were held, and slide shows were put on for the children who were members. Mom was the treasurer for a while, and was sent around to small towns to recruit people to start up new chapters. I understand that the "Sons of Temperance" was very big in England and abroad in the 1930s & 1940s.

I have good and bad memories of Bury Knowle Park and House. While I was attending Margaret Road School we went over to Bury Knowle House for dental treatment: we were sent in a group so that assured a missed afternoon of school. Good memories included time on the swings etc. and, when I was a teenager, playing tennis on the court at the rear of the park.

A Mrs Currill operated a greengrocer's shop in the London Road, and we would buy some of our vegetables from her. When she was a teenager she worked for my Mom and Dad, helping with my brother Ron, so she was always like a big sister to us. She always loaded us down with fruit and vegetables, telling Mom that they would just spoil over the weekend.

During the war, there was a canteen for military personnel at the Methodist Chapel in New High Street: Mom went there to help out, and on occasion would bring two or three Army and A.T.S home to spend the evening: my brothers and I were delighted with their company, as they were heroes to us. It was especially exciting when my Canadian cousin would spend his leaves with us: we sat around and played whist or rummy, and ate (can you believe?) onion sandwiches - that was about all we could come up with to feed them - and of course lots of cups of tea; in summer and fall we had fruit from the garden to share with them.

My dear Great-Aunt Annie Boffin had lived in one of the small homes on our side of New High Street, moving to East Avenue off Cowley Road when I was small: she would come up to Headington on the bus and bring her laundry up to take to a laundress on Lime Walk, first stopping at our home to collect me or one of my brothers to go with her: we loved to do that, because on our way back she would stop by at Coopers & Boffin bake shop on London Road, this end of Lime Walk [No. 70: now western side of Mount Pleasant Hotel], to buy some "sticky buns". She always said, "Let's go to my relatives for some buns" (the Boffins were her cousins).

## World War II in Headington

Towards the end of the war holders of blue ration books could buy a small amount of sweets: that was a big occasion, and we went to Oddy's chemist shop for my ration (besides being a chemist shop they also sold sweets and cigarettes: it was located on the corner of Manor Road and London Road). My uncle Frederick Coppock worked at the butcher's shop which was a bit further along on London Road, During the war we were allowed 1s. 2d worth of meat ration a month: the shilling was for beef, pork or whatever was available and the 2d. could be used for 'offal', which consisted of heart, liver, kidney, tripe etc, all the things I thought were horrible, however Mom fixed them up to be quite tasty, I had said I wouldn't eat any but being hungry I did.

Quite near the butcher's shop was a tea room where cakes could be purchased if they had any extras, I remember queuing up for them, many times being disappointed when they sold out before my turn came. There was a bicycle shop along that side and I remember looking at the 'bikes' longingly, we could never afford a new one but my brother Eric who was good at fixing things made me a 'bike' out of a couple of old wrecks, he sanded the frame, painted it with black enamel, it looked great to me: it was what we called a 'sit up and beg' bike. I was delighted with my 'new bike', and after a lot of practice my Mother decided I rode well enough to be allowed to ride downtown to Oxford to the Girl's Central School in New Inn Hall Street. It was I recall about the beginning of my 3rd year there. The roads had become quite busy with military traffic, it would have been early 1942. It was however wonderful not to have to wait and wait forever to get on a bus to go to school. (I was frequently late, as by the time the bus reached the top of my street New High St it was always full, so many times I walked to the top of Windmill Road to have any chance of getting on a bus.)

I remember getting my first taste of peanut butter during the war: we had to take a bowl to the grocer's shop where the peanut butter would be weighed and put into our container, I didn't like it at first but it was a change from the 'dripping' that Mrs Rogers gave us on our bread. The bread became darker as the war wore on: actually I liked the dark bread, which was rather like the Hovis bread my uncle Philip Morgan always had when we visited them in Gloucester. I can recall seeing white bread for the first time after I arrived in Hamilton Ontario in 1946, It looked as white as snow and so soft, quite a shock after our wartime bread at home.

Another wartime addition was rose hip syrup, We had a lot of rose bushes in our garden, and during the war we were asked to gather the rose hips, and also those we could find from wild roses in the hedgerows. We were told to take them to a chemist's shop, where the chemist would exchange them for rose-hip syrup which was said to be good for you. We took ours to Oddy's chemist shop on London Road.

I can recall how excited we were when the newspapers said that the war would be over in a matter of weeks, Mom had some nice white material she had had for years, she set to and made me a lovely dress which she embroidered with red and white silks: it was beautiful. The day the war ended was a time for great celebration, all the blackout curtains came down, bonfires were lit, people danced and sang in the streets, I remember walking and running down into town wearing my lovely new dress, buildings were floodlit, people were crazy with joy. It would take a long time to get

things back to normal but at least we were not afraid of being bombed anymore, and didn't have to carry gas masks around. Food was still rationed, but now we could try to carry on with our lives and hope that our loved ones would return safely from service. My brother Eric, who was a paratrooper, did eventually return safely after a tour of duty in Palestine.

Margaret Coppock Mayers, March 2002