

Billie Anderson – interviewed in 2019 by Martin Vye

I'm currently in the house of Billie and John Anderson in Bridge and I'm going to ask Billie some questions about her life in Bridge and what she remembers of the area. Billie when did you first come to Kent?

I came to Kent in 1930/1931.

I gather you came from Hertfordshire, which village did you come to when you came?

I came here to live in the rectory at Adisham. The vicar was my guardian and I was there for four years then got packed off to boarding school.

Did you come to Bridge when you were there?

Yes, my great friend and I were allowed to cycle over to Bridge and we'd picnic in Bourne Park and come through the village and the criteria was that we had to be home sharp at 5 o'clock in the afternoon or there was a search party.

Can you remember what Bridge was like at that time?

I can remember where it's now proper tarmaced paths along each side where Albert Terrace is and the other side it was high grassy banks with ordinary dirt paths along the top. There was something like ten or twelve shops or businesses plus the laundry.

Then you moved to Waltham I believe?

No. I went away to boarding school, a convent school and from there went straight into nursing, so I never really came home. In the meantime my mother had moved to Petham so that became home.

Do you remember much about Petham in the thirties, at that time?

It was just a very quiet little village and we were about the last house in the village as you went up through on the main road to Waltham.

Broadway, was it that way? One of my great aunts lived on Stone Street at Stone Street House and I remember coming down to Petham on bikes. There was a shop in Petham wasn't there in those days?

Phipps. Phipps who had the main post office, the main shop and then there was another one on the corner as you come down from the church and into the middle of the village. There was a general store I seem to remember and a butcher, facing the junction.

Then you trained as nurse. Did you do your training before the war or during the war?

No, I went up to get a feel for it at one of the hospices, what is now known as the Trinity Hospice at Clapham Common because it belonged to the same order of nuns as where I went to school. You had to wait for a training place if you wanted to train at one of the London hospitals, you had to wait and pay to do your training. Things have changed a lot.

Then you worked presumably in the hospital and then presumably came the war. What difference did that make to your work pattern?

Thirty six hours on duty sometimes. That was the main thing I can remember. And the bombing at night and looking after a ward full of patients who used to be kept in bed a lot longer then. Completely different ways.

Were these people injured or were they ill?

It was the Royal Northern which was the main hospital along the Holloway Road and it was just general nursing, ordinary straightforward ops for hernias, appendicitis, you name it and we had injuries as well.

So you worked through the war and then you moved down to Canterbury. How did that come about?

I decided that I'd had enough for a while. I don't quite know why I came down, I just needed to get out of it. I got a job at the old Close as it was and worked there for a good few years. I had a short incident or area when I moved over to Westgate when they opened the British Legion Nursing Home there. I worked there for a short while and it was while I was there I decided - I met my husband whom I knew from Bridge. He had come home from Hong Kong where he'd been stationed in the RAF and was very, very unhappy because his first wife had died in childbirth and we met and sort of got together and I married him. J.D. Smith was well known in the area.

And he came from Bridge did he?

J.D. and mother in law, they were both London people who had moved down here. Late mother in law was headmistress at Waltham and they moved over here when she retired and bought a house along the Terrace, number 19 and things sort of moved. We decided to begin with we were in London because he had an old aunt up there whom I used to help and his family had quite a lot of property up there that he used to look after. Unfortunately we had only been married about three months and he had a very bad accident and spent about six months in hospital. That time was when we moved down to be nearer. I've got to stop and think about this because I'm ninety next year. I only just admit it.

Your father in law I think you said, worked for Bridge/Blean Council.

He used to go round training the children in road safety because the problem was beginning to build up then. He used to go round all the schools doing road safety. I

used to go and help him actually when he had a stall at the main Kent Show and this sort of thing.

You had a lovely story, we were talking about the fête on Daddy Fagg's Meadow. Would you like to repeat what you just said?

Daddy Fagg had the farm in the middle of the village and at that time, it was just after we moved down and we had the little cottage opposite for a little while. Daddy Fagg used to come out from the farm in the morning with two little rough haired terriers who used to kick up a heck of a din and he'd have a couple of milk churns on the back of his old Austin 6 or Austin 7 or whatever it was to take into the dairy in Canterbury. These two dogs they'd come out in the garden. He'd take his cap off "Doyder, get in that car. Get in there you old bitch."

He was obviously a character.

He was a great character. Everyone knew Daddy Fagg and you used to go down (because now it's where the Terrace is) but the old farmhouse used to come right on to the pavement. It was a lovely, low, thatched farmhouse and if you wanted extra milk you used to go down round the back and his old sister used to dish out your milk for you in a can.

I presume when he died of course it was sold off.

Yes. The old thatched barn was the first thing to go which was such a pity. That was where Londis is now. You used to go up the road which is now Western Avenue and go across into its meadows where we always held the village fête and Winnie Tamsitt I remember was Fête Queen and I can remember my father in law said "One of the prettiest girls in the village". I taught in his Sunday School with him because he was a Lay Reader. There's a little plaque in the Village Hall to him – J.D.Smith. I think it's still in the Village Hall and there's a little one in church somewhere too.

I think you said your mother helped out at Bridge School for a time?

My mother in law. My first mother in law. She was a retired headmistress and she went back when they needed a headmistress. She never forgot until the day she died that she'd been a headmistress. Whoa!

She just helped out in between two heads there. Going back to the 1950s or the 40s I think when you were first back again, what was transportation like for example? Could you get into Canterbury easily by bus at that time?

I don't remember. I can't remember doing anything but biking. I used to cycle. You'd got the station open up there but that was Canterbury South and not many people used that. Your main train was coming through to Bekesbourne.

That's interesting. You used that because it took you through to the East.

Yes. It was more or less in the centre for Canterbury of course.

I understand that actually very few people in the village really used the Bridge Station. Unlike Barham where they would come in and it was in the middle of the village almost, but Bridge not. Was it safe to cycle into Canterbury in those days, in terms of traffic I mean?

Oh yes, you never thought anything about it. When I worked in Canterbury you could come out on the bus, I hadn't got a car at that stage and if it was a nice day we walked. I've walked in in thick snow by now to be on duty.

So you worked in the old Close, by then it was an old people's home.

Yes it was purely that. I worked there for a couple of years, three years I think it was altogether.

Because it moved up to the New Close in my time here. Shops. You mentioned when you were in Adisham and you cycled in and there were a lot of shops. Can you remember any of them in particular?

There was Harvey Price's which was opposite the Plough. That was the one we used to go in most. Then there was a lovely little grocer's shop between where Laurence lives, opposite the big house and, is it Albert Terrace? Which is the terrace where you've got three...? There was a little shop there, Hubbard's which you went down a step into it. It was a little general store. There was a grocer's, a general store and bakery on the corner of Union Lane. I can't think of his name now. There was a bakery there where it's all built on now.

Then you've got the Village Hall where you had all the hops. Everything happened in the Village Hall. Next door to the garage was a piano tuner's then there was the garage. Then down the other side there was Pessord the butcher. The general store on the corner, I can't think who ran that. Pessord's butcher and his yard was opposite next door to where it's been a garden centre and all sorts of things since then. Pessord's slaughter house I think he had there and his sort of store place. On the corner of the little steps was Hawkins the tobacconist.

Coming down the village, on the corner opposite the whitewashed cottage was Elsie Turner's the greengrocer because I used to help them out they were great friends of mine. They'd got all the garden at the back and they used to grow everything and Norman would go down. Elsie would say "So and so wants a fresh cabbage, go and cut a cabbage." There was a little orchard where they had chickens and there would always be fresh eggs.

Then next door was his brother and they had a little wireless repair shop. He'd do all sorts of wireless repairs and things like that. Coming down the village the other side there was... Now what was the chemist's name? If a girl dared go in for a lipstick you used to get a long lecture from him. "God says in the Bible that the flowers of the field do not need decorating" or something like that. He'd quote long passages from the Bible. Has no one told you about him?

Next door to him was a cycle shop where you could buy anything from an elephant's horseshoe to a pin. Ernie Downs? Or Frank. I know one was son and one was father. Then where the bridge is over the river there was Hawkins the tobacconist and paper shop and next door to him was a shop that Priscilla Hawkins ran and that was an outfitters and she knew her special customers and what they liked and she'd go and buy wholesale with certain people in mind. She'd trained at one of the big shops like Martin's if you remember Martin's in Canterbury. She'd been a buyer for a shop like that so she knew what she was doing. Next door to them was the shoe repairer between Prilly's shop and the Plough.

Are we talking about 'Saddler's'?

Yes.

So many shops in Bridge at that time, you'd get so much done just by walking down the village.

Of course when you got to the other little row you'd got the chemist on the corner. There was always the bakery the other end where they did all their own baking. It used to smell absolutely gorgeous. There was the little shop where the old boy sold cycle bits and all sorts. He was next to the chemist. Downs. Old Ernie Downs.

I suppose the big question is how do you compare the life of the village now and the life fifty years ago. Do you think it's changed for the better or worse or is it just different?

The village I find still has a lovely friendly atmosphere. There are some people who've moved in who I'm not sure whether they're timid of making friends or whether they're just not basically country or village people and don't know how to. Wary perhaps.

They've not experienced that sort of village friendship and society?

We can't walk down the village without everyone saying "Hello" or "How are you?" Or you just give them a smile if you're not sure. But there again that depends on one's individual personality.

Billie thank you very much indeed for that.