

# OWEN'S STORY

## In the Beginning

War has affected me throughout my life. I have to go back to 1918, which as you may guess was before I was born. Two young people both aged 16, who worked at Thornycroft's in Basingstoke, met on Armistice Day, 11 th November 1918, and became an item. They were both Basingstoke born and bred: the girl born in Ye Olde Toll House, in Hackwood Road (roughly where the entrance to the Memorial Park is in Hackwood Road), and the boy born in Essex Road. The boy worked in the factory and the girl was a silver service waitress in the board room. They married on Boxing Day in 1924, and their first home was with the young lady's sister, Emily, in Chapel Street, Basingstoke. They eventually bought a house at 70 George Street, Basingstoke. That young couple were my mother and father.

## Childhood (1930 -38)

I was born on 22nd June 1930 at 70, George Street. As an only child growing up in George Street, I made friends with three boys roughly the same age as me, who lived close by of whom, sadly, two are no longer with us. George Street became our playground, something that would not be possible today because of the traffic. When we needed a bit more space to run around in, King George V playing field, next to where Morrison's is, became our playground.

Most of the people who lived in George Street worked at Thornycroft's, on the railway or for local builders. In George Street itself, the local shops provided everything the inhabitants could want literally from the cradle to the grave: with a chapel, a sweet shop and tobacconist, a general store, a post office, a baker, a barber's shop and lady's hairdresser. In neighbouring May Street there was a butcher and in Queens Road there was a dairy, a greengrocers and a paper shop and, to the grave, an undertakers.

Our house had three bedrooms, but there were no electric lights upstairs and no such thing as electric points (sockets). The toilet was outside, although it was still part of the house and we had a small garden which backed on to the River Loddon. Soon after I started school I developed whooping cough. Mum and dad had the electric light installed in my bedroom by a retired builder who lived three doors away. He drilled a hole through into mum and dad's bedroom so that they could feed a flex through to connect my light to a reading light in their bedroom.

I was an inveterate digger of holes at the bottom of the garden which always filled up with water, as I dug below the water table of the River Loddon. The swimming pool near to the current ring road was emptied into the Loddon when the water was changed, usually on a Saturday, when it rushed down the stream. (I cannot see that happening today). One Easter I had a misadventure with the River Loddon in King George V playing fields when I fell in. Walking along the passage, at the back of our house in George Street, singing "I fell in the river" did not endear me to my mother, who promptly stripped me and scrubbed me down with disinfectant. I still remember to this day, that all this commotion interrupted my dad from painting the larder primrose.

At the age of 5 I started school at Brook Street School in Lower Brook Street, which is now known as Brookvale. I remained there until I was 8. My dad had an allotment close to the railway line. I can well remember the making of the Will Hay classic, *Oh Mister Porter* in 1937. The railway engine that was in the film had a very tall chimney. When it went out on to the railway line to Cliddesden, where most of the film was made, the inhabitants of George Street used to turn out to wave to the train and its passengers as it went by. The railway line to Cliddesden followed the route along which the ring road between the Milestones roundabout and the Winchester Road roundabout now takes today.

One scene in the film depicts the Fat Boy (Graham Moffat) hitting the heads of the "Baddies" when they looked out of the carriage windows with a big shovel. In the film there was a loud bang as each head was struck, but you cannot make a big bang with a rubber shovel! Graham Moffat himself could not fall off the top of the carriage as he was tied on by his ankles.

One day when I was on the allotments with dad, I said "What is that tall tower over there?" In three words he said, "That's the Asylum". I had no idea what an asylum was, but roughly ten years later, I

went there to work. Dad could have had no idea that his little boy would work there for 44 years and 69 days in the shadow of that tower. On the day of my retirement I was the longest serving employee of the hospital. I was recalled after retirement and received my final pay cheque in April 2006, after 60 enjoyable years.

### Moving to Kempshott

Unbeknown to me, Mum and Dad were considering moving to Kempshott, where they bought a new two bedroom bungalow in Buckskin Lane. It was a big change to the family's environment. Prior to moving in all three of us made regular trips to the property so that dad could work on the garden. Dad would ride his bicycle and Mum and I would go by bus. Going home in the evening required us to walk to Worting Road, where Mum and I would catch the bus back to Basingstoke. Being a youngster Dad would put me on his bike and push me down to the bus stop. I was scared stiff and screamed all the way.

In 1938 there were only 16 properties in Buckskin Lane between Five Ways and Chiltern Way (as is now), six on the left hand side and 10 on the right hand side (there was only one house). Further down the lane were two farm cottages where the chicane is today, and three bungalows at the junction of Buckskin Lane with Worting Road.

Our bungalow, known as Talbot (named after my Dad's mother's maiden name) was stood in a garden that was 100 yards deep. We had a bathroom, which was a novelty, the toilet was indoors, and taps you could turn on to get hot water out of them. In the summer, it was a question of putting the copper on to heat the water, which was then carried into the bathroom in buckets, as you did not always want a fire on in hot weather

When we lived in George Street my mother cooked on a gas stove. Moving to Kempshott there was no gas and a limited electricity supply, so it was some time before my mother could have an electric cooker. So she joined everyone else in the village having to cook on a paraffin or primus stove. The interoven, heated by coal, in the dining room was only used occasionally, and not very often during the summer. In terms of electricity supply we only had one two pin socket and one 15 Amp socket for the copper in total. (Count your sockets in your house today).

Our playground was in our gardens or in Buckskin Lane, the latter of which would not be possible today. The Kempshott of 1938 was somewhat different to that of today. It was a quiet village not connected to Basingstoke, with no footpaths, no main drainage, no playing fields, no school, no Church, except for the Methodist Chapel, and only eight street lights for the whole village. The last time I counted the streetlights between Heather Way and Five Ways they numbered 45 along one side of the road.

### School days in Kempshott

Kempshott did not have its own school, so I went to Worting School in Old Kempshott Lane which has recently been knocked down and built on. Life at Worting School was somewhat different to schooling today. Children had garden plots, the loos were outside, and there were no school dinners and no central heating. The only source of heating was a coke stove in the corner of the class room, which we used to use to warm our school milk. Each class consisted of three year groups in one room. When I went to Worting School I went backwards in my schooling. I was doing things that I had previously done sometime before at Brook Street School. Consequently, my school days at Worting only lasted 8 months. I was lucky enough to be able to move to Fairfields School in Basingstoke. My Aunt Ginny (my mum's sister) worked for the headmaster and his wife. The headmaster said that he would take me before age eleven, if my father was prepared to pay for my bus fare to Basingstoke and home. I was there for three years and passed through the hands of three different teachers, and in 1941 I gained a scholarship to Queen Mary's Grammar School, which is now the Vyne School,

### Kempshott House

I remember going to Kempshott House along with other children in 1938, it was derelict, with water coming through the roof. One thing that remains in my memory was that there was a built-in safe which had a large brass plate on the door with the manufacturer's name on it.

During the war the house was taken over by the Government and became the "Petroleum Warfare Department". From Kempshott we could see pillars of flames shooting up from the flame throwers and then clouds of thick black smoke.

### September 1939

In September 1939 War was declared. Mum, dad and I were sat with our next door neighbours, Mr and Mrs Clatworthy, and listened to Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, declare that we were at War with Germany. Both Mum and Mrs Clatworthy shed tears. Life changed as all the street lights went out and all windows were covered with heavy curtains or blinds so that no light could be seen from enemy aircraft flying overhead. The few cars that were on the road had cowls fitted over their headlights to reduce the glare seen from enemy aircraft flying overhead. The period from the declaration of war to May/June 1940 became known as the Phoney War as there was no active land action.

### Air Raid Shelter

We had a home built air raid shelter at the bottom of our garden which we shared with the Clatworthys at no.160, ourselves at no.158 and the Sopers at no.156. It was roughly 3 metres square, 2 metres deep and accommodated 6 adults (sometimes more) and 3 children. It had battery powered light and oil stove to heat water to make tea, with a pot for the toilet.

Many nights were spent in this shelter when the Blitz of Coventry and the Midlands took place, as there was a danger that enemy aircraft would jettison their bombs, if being chased by our night fighters or damaged by anti-aircraft guns.

One night a parachute was found hanging on the electricity cables in Buckskin Lane. It was dark and could not be easily identified. It was thought to be a parachute mine. The local air raid wardens told everyone to sleep on the floor of their properties in the room furthest from the electricity supply or alternatively sleep in their air raid shelters if they had one. So we all spent the night in our shelter at the bottom of our garden. It was not until daylight that it was realised that the "Parachute mine" was in fact a radiosonde parachute that was used by the weather forecasting service to provide weather reports for the forces.

### December 1939

In December 1939 there was a big sea battle between three British cruisers, *Ajax*, *Achilles* and *Exeter*, and the German heavy cruiser, *Admiral Graf Spee*, which became known as the "Battle of the River Plate". *The Admiral Graf Spee* took shelter in Montevideo Harbour, Uruguay, and was only allowed a limited time of stay to put ashore its dead and wounded. My Aunt Milly (Mum's sister) and Uncle David were staying with us for the weekend. Uncle David was a bit of an expert picking up shortwave broadcasts on our wireless and he tuned in to an American radio commentator, Mike Fowler, describing the scene on 17th December, as the *Admiral Graf Spee* put out to sea but was scuttled in Montevideo Harbour rather than facing the British cruisers. Her commanding officer, Hans Langsdorff, was convinced by false reports circulated by British Intelligence that he would be facing superior British forces, and consequently decided to scuttle his ship. Three days later he shot himself.

### Dunkirk

The Phoney War ended when Germany invaded the three neutral countries Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg and smashed through into France ending up with the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force in May/June from Dunkirk and Calais.

My Aunt Edie belonged to a Mother's Group in one of the Basingstoke Churches and she and her colleagues along with my mother helped feed the soldiers at Basingstoke Railway Station, who were being evacuated from France. She came home very distressed at the state they were in, as the soldiers were wounded, wet through, some with no uniforms, just wrapped in blankets.

## Battle of Britain over Basingstoke

Only two bombs were dropped on Kempshott which fell on the field between Pack Lane and the Railway line. No damage done. Today it is still possible to see the remains of the craters in the Battledown fields when they have been freshly ploughed. On 16th August, 1940, from my front garden in Buckskin Lane we watched the bombing of Church Square in Basingstoke.

While at school, on the 24th October 1940, bombs were dropped in Cliddesden Road, roughly 500 yards from Fairfields School, making a near direct hit on St. Vincent's private school. When we heard the explosion we all dived under our desks, as there had not been any air raid warning. Sadly two people were killed and several were injured, but the pupils were in the Memorial Park playing so they escaped injury.

One Sunday afternoon my mother, father and I were walking down Victoria Street on the way home from my Grandmothers'. When I looked up and said to my father "That's a Junker 88 up there", to which he replied "Don't be so damned silly". I then replied "Dad look, he's just dropped his bombs". I was well on the way to a thick ear from my father, but the bombs exploded before he could react. They fell either side of the railway at Basing, near the site of the Hampshire Clinic today.

As the Grammar school did not have classes on a Wednesday afternoon (instead we had to go on Saturday morning), my mother and I went to the cinema in Basingstoke. An air raid warning came up on the cinema screen saying "Leave if you wish to". I insisted we stayed until the end of the programme, which we did. Just as we came out of the cinema we heard the sound of machine guns being fired. When we got home to Buckskin Lane there were numerous policemen and ARP wardens there as Buckskin Lane had been machine gunned. One of the semi-detached bungalows had a hole in the apex of its roof and a fir tree at *Bellavista* in Pack Lane had been lacerated. Luckily there were no personal injuries.

Notes on teenager during 1940 – 45 helping on the farms bringing in the harvest + photos
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## Out to Work (1945 – 48)

The war ended in 1945 and everything went back to peace time, 1946 came along and I was due to leave The Grammar School and start working for a living.

I always wanted to go farming when I left school, but it wasn't to be. I came home for lunch from the farm one Friday when my Dad said that there was a job advertised in *The Hants and Berks* (now *The Gazette*) that would suit me; it did state that applicants had to hold a School Certificate. I said "I do not have a Certificate". His reply was, "Turn over the page." There I found the publication of the School Certificate results for Queen Mary's School. That same evening I wrote and applied for the job, had an interview the following Friday and started work on the Monday morning as a Junior Clerk. My salary was a massive £70 per annum plus £39 cost of living allowance. This was the start of my career at Park Prewett Hospital and Basingstoke North Hampshire Hospital of 44 years plus, the latter 22 years of which I was a Department Manager.

## National Service ( 1948 -50)

Left over from the war was compulsory National Service in the armed forces. This caught up with me when I returned home from a week's holiday to find a manila envelope with orders to report to RAF Padgate, from there to Bridgnorth, and then to RAF Bawdsey perched on the top of cliffs looking out over the North Sea, (Bawdsey was the cradle of RADAR). From there I was posted to RAF Ibsley, on the outskirts of the New Forest. The accommodation was pretty grim and every day we had to travel to RAF Sopley in lorries with wooden seats, and a canvas cover to keep out the wind and weather. I stuck out the winter of 1948 there.



Owen as Aircrafts man 1<sup>st</sup> class 2402764  
Blissett in 1948 at Sherborne St John shortly  
before departing for places east ...  
turned out to be RAF Habbaniya

Being fed up with the atrocious conditions, three of us volunteered (dangerous ground) to go to Germany. Instead of going to Germany all three of us found ourselves climbing up the gangway on to *The Empire Trooper* bound for the Middle East. One of our trio of volunteers left the boat in Malta, but he did not stay there long, the next step for him was Hong Kong. The two of us left were told when we reached Port Said that we were to go to RAF El Hamra for onward transmission to Iraq, that was me, I said "Where the heck is that?", (the whole world knows now). My other colleague was to go to Khartoum. I think I was lucky in my posting because RAF Habbaniya was the showpiece of the RAF.

I spent the whole of my posting at the sharp end there in Flying Control. I was lucky that I was paired up with a South African Flight Lieutenant, who taught me how to do his job just in case there was an accident that he could not cope with in its entirety. He would often say to me when he was on the telephone "It's all yours Don".

I left Habbaniya in June 1950, and the last time I wore my RAF uniform was 22nd June, (my birthday), and my service finally ended in July 1950.

### Marriage

Back home to Basingstoke, and back to the day job at Park Prewett, and the wages office.

In October 1950 I was asked if I was going to the dance at the Hospital by one of the secretaries, I said "No, I have not got a partner", she said that she was going with her boy-friend and her best friend, would I like to make it up to a foursome?

I agreed to it, subsequently the young lady became my wife on 29th October 1955.



Owen & Edna on 29 Oct 1955 at St Thomas of Canterbury , Worting

I heard that a man in Kempshott Lane who had a large garden, wanted to sell part of it, so I bought the plot of ground, and we had a bungalow built. We moved in on the day we got married, as I write this we have just celebrated our Diamond Wedding on the 29th October. The name of our house is “Habbaniya” in memory of my happy time that I spent in Iraq.

Despite Habbaniya being some three thousand miles away, we had several people who knocked on the door asking how we got the name. One especially, was the then Mayor of Basingstoke, Harold Allerston, who was stationed at RAF Habbaniya are the same time as I was. I probably walked past the building where he worked at least twice a day, and yet we did not meet.

### Solving a Family Mystery

My wife’s mother’s marriage certificate gave her address as Kempshott House and occupation as “Domestic”; we could not work out why she lived in Kempshott House. During a conversation with a school friend of mine early this year, he was telling me about the Kempshott Estate being up for auction in 1926. His father had kept the catalogue when he went to the sale and he still had it. Looking through it as a matter of interest, we found the house had been split up into flats; one of the occupants was Mrs Angliss, my wife’s grandmother. Problem solved.

### Memories of Old Kempshott (1955 – 65)

Chicken farms  
Egg Packing station

### Epilogue



The Blissetts golden wedding celebration October 2005

Owen Blissett  
17.10.2016

## **Footnote on Cowdrey Down, the old Workhouse and Basing Hospital in the new NHS**

As Barbara Large writes in her book on the history of the Basingstoke Workhouse ( p 163-165):

During the Second World War (1939–45), two large hut-type wards, named Bramley and Candover, were built behind the infirmary and these continued in use after the war, separated into male and female wards and each holding thirty or forty patients. A 1950s photograph shows rows of beds down each side of each hut. After this point it is difficult to pin down exactly what happened to the buildings, but the emphasis was now definitely on Cowdrey Down Hospital. The old workhouse building was put to various uses and parts of it were demolished over time; nurses were accommodated from about 1946, when the infirmary became an official rooms. The new National Health Service took over the site in 1948. Nurses were still lodged there in 1971, as evidenced by a HBG report of complaints of the conditions. Everything was as expected: tiny windows; dark, grim outlook; ancient and failing plumbing.

The elderly patients in the now old infirmary were often desperately unhappy; they really did not want to be there:

People still regarded the hospital there as the workhouse, and so when they were being put into the elderly care wards ... they were in an awful state because they felt their families and their doctor were casting them into the workhouse, which had always been a place of fear for them all their lives'.<sup>11</sup>

Finally on one Saturday in December 1974 the end came – the antiquated plumbing and heating system at Cowdrey Down finally gave up and all the patients and staff were transferred to the new District Hospital ( now the maternity unit of Basingstoke & North Hants District Hospital) over about four days - only just ready to receive them.

Some of the patients had been at Cowdrey Down for twenty -five or thirty years and were so unsettled that they died during the following months.

### **A footnote from Owen Blissett, January 2017**

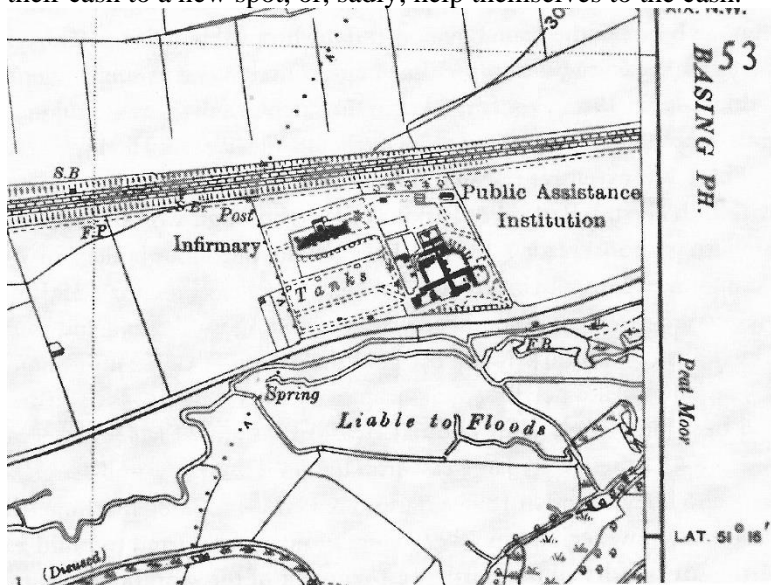
Owen started his working life straight out of school as a junior clerk at Park Prewett Hospital in 1946. As the National Health Service was launched in July 1948 the old Workhouse became part of the NHS - now called Basing Road Hospital. Owen was called up to do his National Service at this point and travelled the world (or the Middle East at least, with the RAF) returned to his job in the wages office at Park Prewett in summer 1950.

The wages office operated the NHS payroll for the whole District and so Owen is a good authority on the early years of hospital life in Basingstoke.



Basingstoke Infirmary  
c.1900  
( Basingstoke Heritage Society)

Apart from Park Prewett Hospital the only other hospital in Basingstoke was The Infirmary, built in 1900 beside the old Workhouse building, expanded during the war with 2 single story buildings as indicated in Barbara Large's book. Old habits die hard and the older people of Basingstoke still referred to the Cowdery Down complex as The Workhouse, or 'the Grubber' (tramps slang for source of 'grub' or food ). Owen also recalls that male tramps who were getting a roof over their heads would sometimes make a hole in the grassy bank outside the grounds of the hospital and bury any money that they had. – not realising that they had been seen by the local lads who would move their cash to a new spot, or, sadly, help themselves to the cash.



Location of Infirmary and Workhouse from 1930 OS map. The Workhouse is the location of the Basingstoke Clinic since 1982 and the Infirmary is now its car park.

As Payroll Manager, Owen often had occasion to visit Cowdery Down, where the Matron of the Infirmary was Mrs Thornton and a cup of tea and possibly a slice of Bread Pudding was always welcoming.

Eventually Cowdery Down took on the roles of Geriatric unit, a Convalescence Unit and the location of the District Physiotherapy unit. The titles change and the quality of the care changes – but the clientele sounds very similar.

From time to time the ladies of the Payroll Department were asked by the Head of Finance to do extra tasks - for no extra pay but time off in lieu. The one occasion which stands out in Owen's memory was an occasion sometime between 1968 and 1974 when they were asked to go to Cowdery Down one Sunday afternoon to fill in voting forms. What none of the wages department staff realise was that there were still patients 'left over' from the workhouse days and it was these people who the



wages ladies were asked to complete the forms for; which meant that they had to have a face to face meeting with each person to obtain the details required for the form. At the end of the afternoon it was 'job done' but there were a lot of tears shed as they had met patients who had been incarcerated in the workhouse for many years. Some had been sent there for having a baby out of wedlock or for stealing eggs when they were starving.

Owen Blissett , 2017