

*Eighteen
to One Against*

The Story of a Fenland House



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A Soffits Childhood



FORTY years on it is still much the same. It has been extended a little. It now looks less like a house set in a Fen orchard, more like the desirable residences which have sprung up in Ha'penny Lane since. There are no longer the symmetrical lines of Yellow-Egg plum trees. Only the occasional one survives. Thankfully the undergrowth of gooseberry bushes was excised many years ago. Little saplings that were planted then, now tower scores of feet in the air. The one stable for the horse has become a corral. Creepers now smother much of the masonry.

And the cesspit still does not work.

I witnessed the birth of Soffits. I was four when it was conceived, five during its gestation and celebrated my sixth birthday less than a month after its birth.

The world was different then. The Second World War was so recently over that school children talked about what their fathers did in it with the same enthusiasm as if it was last night's television. It wasn't. Universal television was to take another ten years or so to come.

There was still a certain austerity about. The heating in Miss Jermy's school consisted of the most rudimentary form of central heating – a large black stove in the middle of the room

Judging from school photographs we all looked as though we were the children of refugees. I still remember many of their names: Carol Stringer (in one of her many lectures to us Miss Jermy announced that she was going to put her at the top of the class. For weeks afterwards I looked up at the rafters in eager

anticipation that one day Miss Jermy would be true to her word and string her up there – but she never did). Then there was Max Houghton who announced one day that his father had a gun and was going to shoot me. I lived in terror for a whole term. There was Sydney Waters who entertained us one day by dirtying his pants. I met him some 35 years later when he was a high powered bank manager, but found it difficult to remove from my mind the only significant memory I had of him at school. Martin Griggs was around for many years. My memory is probably quite wrong, but I see him as having arms and legs of approximately equal length and having the intellect of a slightly retarded chimpanzee. There were girls too. My first love was Deirdre Beach (who looked exactly like the naughty girl on page 3 of *The Beano*), but I also had a close liaison with Barbara Prosser. I never took to Denise Robinson, mainly because she always called me ‘Witsard’. Every time she did that I hit her. It was only later that I learned about such things as speech impediments. And then of course there was me – round faced, myopic, wearing National Health glasses and a handed down fair isle sweater.

Outside the school there were the villagers. Mr Quince the baker often gave away free buns at the end of the day if he had dough left over. There was Councillor Mr Curston, short, strutting and pompous. He opened every garden fête within miles. He made the speech when Miss Jermy retired. If he had gone on for much longer, she would have died of old age before she had any opportunity to enjoy her retirement.

Mr Pooley owned the sweet shop, a dark small treasure house containing jars of every imaginable sweet. My favourites were the bull’s-eyes that changed colours. I have not seen them for years. Presumably they were banned by one of the earlier edicts of the European Commission. We regaled him almost every day with this question:

‘Hello Mr Pooley, have you done a poo in your shoe?’ He never was cross. Perhaps he valued the custom which our penny or two of pocket money provided.

Mr Billington owned one of the village stores. He sold maggots

in his raisins, and complained that the Fen air was bad for his asthma. He eventually left to return to Liverpool to aid his recovery. He died there a month afterwards.

The beginnings of Soffits were a confusing pile of earth with concrete delineating a pitifully small outline of a building. I was told at the time that the earth was going to be turned into our furniture. I nearly believed it. I was pretty credulous then – perhaps still am.

Steadily the house grew. We all shared the excitement on the daily visits, the smell of the drying cement, the scent of sawn wood, the gradual taking shape of a home. The topping out ceremony was a truly Anglo-American affair with the Union Jack on one chimney and the Stars and Stripes on the other.

Full of the wisdom which all five-year-olds have, I offered copious advice to the builders: how to lay bricks, how to saw wood, where to put the garage. For at least the next two years, becoming a builder ranked close to being a train driver as the job I wanted to do when I grew up.

There were still a few builders left when we moved in. We couldn't delay. Mr Haig (with a wife like a moulting chicken) had already agreed to buy our old house. He would permit no delay. He had already started planting the garden. We regarded that as still our territory and bombed his tomato plants when he was not around. Mr Haig never did like me. I met him in later life. I think he still blamed me for the failure of his 1953 tomato harvest.

We moved. 'We' were the four Barrs and their worldly goods, a rotund fluffy dog called Banger, Mitty the cat (who had been adopted by Banger as a kitten when her mother was run over. Dog and cat remained inseparable lifelong friends), a clutch of chickens and a horse called Rubeki.

We were allotted our places. Only the horse and the chickens did not live inside (though even they would wander in from time to time).

And so began the rest of my life. Life was still full of mystery and adventure.

First of all we explored our new terrain – the garden and the

orchard. A wire netting fence (with a pair of wrought iron gates incongruously set in it) marked the dividing line between the two. There were numerous trees to climb. The fact that they were all the same did not stop us – nor from occasionally falling out of them.

The trees provided more than just adventure. For many years we ran an annual plum campaign, picking and selling the yellow-green plums. The price was a penny a pound (in the days when a penny was a decent sized coin). About once a week during the campaign we would go with bulging pockets to the Thatched Cottage toy shop in Wisbech and spend our profits on Matchbox toys.

The water-filled ditches (called ‘dykes’ in the Fens) were also part of our domain. There was more mud than water in them. Our makeshift boats of tin tubs and wooden boxes often capsized tipping us into the murky world of the sticklebacks.

When it froze we would slide and slither in the dykes along three of the four sides of the land, accompanied by the dogs – Banger and Equil (a slim sleek whippet with little brain, who could nonetheless talk to order when she wanted a bowl of tea).

The dykes provided other entertainment. In the early days we were virtually on an island. There was just one bridge. If you missed it you got wet.

More vehicles than I can remember came to grief in the dykes. One of the earliest was the bread man. For the next decade or so we asked him every time he made his delivery whether he had driven into the dyke. With more patience than I would ever have shown he good-humouredly said he had not.

The bread man was followed from time to time by the cars of patients, the fishmonger, the proprietor of the local department store, a horse box, several lorries and Griselda. Griselda was not in a car at the time. She and Mona Weisbacher provided us with insight into drunkenness.

Mona would come to the grown-ups’ parties and always get drunk. She would sway around muttering invective in German before eventually crashing against a mantelpiece or falling down

stairs. Sometimes my mother would have to sew her up before she could go home. Once, after a drunken SOS we piled into my father's Singer Hunter and dashed to her house. On opening the door we could see her legs lying across the stairs. My brother and I were shooed back into the car, where we speculated that we had seen the legs of our first dead body. But we were wrong. Mona lived to crash against a good many more mantelpieces before she expired.

Griselda came from Scottsbluff – the home town of my mother deep into the American Midwest. One night, dressed in a multi-coloured skirt she waded into the dyke up to her waist.

Further afield was Ha'penny Lane. The efforts of the local authority ebbed not far beyond our land. The road became rutted and muddy in winter. It was here that we rode our bicycles between the fields of cabbages and corn, in snow, in heat waves, in rain and through the eerie mists which often descended on the area, turning the fields into haunted landscapes and shrouding us in chilly damp cocoons.

There was also summer. Opposite us, the straw and haystacks of Marcus Bates nestled among the Second World War Nissen Huts. Every summer the threshing team would arrive and set up their complex machinery. We would sit and watch for hours as the stooks were shaken and bashed and eventually baled. The stacks grew high and we played and dived among them until we were chased away.

Then on hot days my mother would announce that we were going to the sea. We piled into her convertible Morris Minor, took the hood down and headed for Hunstanton, the car laden with Bonnie, Banger, Equil, buckets, spades and assorted children. We would play and eat sand sandwiches till the sun started to burn the edge of the sea.

Bonnie was (and is) part of our childhood. She was recruited to prise my brother and me apart in our many fights. She joined us as a teenager, and still helps in the house even though she should be drawing her pension. Once a little boy commented to me: 'It's not fair. You have two mummies. The rest of us only have one.'

The house was also the surgery. We learned to treat patients as second-class humans, laying traps to discourage them from plaguing us. We developed a telephone technique which almost equalled the unhelpfulness of the average receptionist in a modern surgery. But we also learned something about the human condition. I did not know that adults could cry till I saw Mrs Melchett in tears after she fell out with her husband. I also discovered that people occasionally died and, more inconveniently, gave birth. Home deliveries were then the rule. But home deliveries meant that my mother was often out all night, and that breakfast was then created by a bad tempered father.

It was a warm and loving childhood, but there were inevitably moments when the embers grew low. Often they coincided with the Aga going out, which it generally did when other things went wrong too. The house (with no central heating then) became cold, especially when the grown ups were tense and angry.

Once my beloved Meccano box was hurled, complete with all its contents, into the garden. Perhaps it was indiscreet to build a crane on the kitchen floor at breakfast time when people were still wandering round in bare feet.

The cat was periodically thrown into the garden too – but that is what cats are for isn't it?

After a particularly prolonged spell of paternal ill temper I re-enacted a breakfast scene on my reel-to-reel tape recorder. At an opportune time I replayed my poor imitation of his voice, along with its ferocious commands to stop crying, shut up, behave and not interrupt when he was reading the newspaper. Curiously it defused the situation – though I could equally have been killed.

There were other animals which shared our childhood. There were always horses. Rubeki was the resident horse. He was the same age as my brother and saw us through into adulthood. He was a sleek, temperamental horse who lived in perpetual fear of meeting a donkey.

Most Sunday mornings involved a trip to Mary Russell's riding establishment beside the River Nene. If the riders went out into the lanes and byways we would be confined to the back of the car as

my father drove very slowly behind the bottoms of ambling equestrians. He would manage to read the sports pages of the Sunday papers and drive at the same time (an achievement which is beyond the capacity of many recent US Presidents). If Rubeki even thought he saw a donkey he would be away like a streak of lightning. Then my father would hurl down the paper and race off in pursuit to rescue my mother from the attack of Eeyore-phobia.

There was a sheep too. It was called 'Sheep'. It thought it was a dog, and would bound out of the orchard in friendly pursuit of afternoon walkers. Many of them were alarmed by the approach of two hundredweight of wool, and would take flight across Marcus Bates' fields.

My brother and I learned many of the facts of life from our caged animals: mice, hamsters, guinea pigs and – most spectacularly of all – rabbits. The rabbit hutch was balanced precariously on a pile of bricks. When the rabbits mated, which was about four times an hour, the hutch rocked and shook. We never lost interest. Other children played pass the parcel and musical chairs at their parties. The rabbits provided the only entertainment at ours.

It could not remain innocent and carefree for ever. At the age of nine my brother and I were dispatched to a fashionable boys' boarding school where we were incarcerated for five years (excellent conditioning if they ever catch up with me and send me to a grown up prison). When we were released for holidays, Soffits, having grown in the memory to castle-like proportions, seemed small and cramped. Our childhood village friends began to disappear. We began to encounter the subtleties of class distinction.

Then there were the teenage years and the first, halting, approaches to the female of the species. My brother and I shared a Land Rover which cost £45 and was constantly in need of major repairs. Very occasionally William and I (I will spare the details of our childhood names) would hunt together, driving the Land Rover along the route from the Friday Bridge camp into Wisbech. We had painted it yellow in the hope that it would do what our acne'd complexions did not – and attract girl friends for us.

Times were more innocent then. Young women hitch-hiked

alone and were generally safe to do so. We used up gallons of parental petrol driving between Friday Bridge and Wisbech giving lifts to anyone who looked promising. Occasionally we would get it wrong. Once I stopped to pick up a long haired blonde. Too late I noticed he was sporting a moustache. I gave him a lift anyway but made no proposition to him.

Once William and I were sandwiched in the back of a car, separated from each other by a very attractive blonde called Gill. I felt a hand and gave it a squeeze. The hand squeezed back. I squeezed harder and held on lovingly. It took me many minutes to discover that I had come the nearest I would ever come to brotherly love: Gill was not holding hands with anybody.

One rainy night the Land Rover expired a mile from home. The two girl friends had to help push. Not long afterwards they exchanged us for boys who had reliable motor bikes.

And one day it was over. We were grown up and had homes and families of our own. Life seems more solemn and serious without haystacks and sticklebacks and Miss Jermy and seeing drunken Mona and pushing the Land Rover. Or is it just the yellow glow of the ripening plums which lends enchantment to the memory?

RICHARD BARR