‘Memories of West End’ – Cynthia Johnson

Cynthia Johnson, born in 1936, grew up in Halebourne Lane, West End. More than half a century later, in May 1989 and August-September 1991, she wrote a memoir, giving it the title ‘Memories of a child living at Halebourne Lane during and after the 1939-45 Second World War’.

West End Village Society is grateful to Cynthia’s younger sister Liz Fox for giving us, in 2026, the memoir for inclusion in our ‘Memories of West End’ project.

The text below is Cynthia’s own words. When she refers to things as they are ‘now’ she means as they were in 1991.

Coming to West End

In the 1920s West End’s vicar was the ‘Boxing’ Rev Robbins, so known because he gave lessons to the young boys. His wife was responsible for my dad and his brother coming to West End in 1924, when they were 12 and 10 respectively. There were 7 children in dad’s family and when his mother died in childbirth at 38 years and his dad died as a result of his war wounds, the family was split up – the eldest girl was out at work, the next two were sent by Dr Barnado’s to Australia, Dad and Uncle came to West End, and the younger two went to different relatives. They never lost touch.

There was a society in London who were responsible for contacting Mrs Robbins to see if West End ladies could take in ‘Pension Boys’, which she did. A Mrs Harriss who had two young daughters of her own took in three – Dad, Uncle and Harry Tarrant. She was SO GOOD to them all and fed them well. When she used to go wortleberry picking on Red Road Hill she used say ‘you don’t have to come if you don’t want to boys, but I’m taking the dinner with me!’ They decided that the walk there and back was worth it! Dad went to Guildford Tech and did his homework in the kitchen by the light of an oil lamp. Mrs Harriss was the mother of Mrs Emmie Hunt of Benner Lane.

Another lady took in two ‘Thomas’ brothers, one of whom was drowned and the other has been married for 50 years this year.

Most of us – including me - were born in Connaught Nursing Home in Bagshot which is now a shelter home on Jenkins Hill.

The war years

I was three years old when the 1939-45 war broke out and nearly nine when it ended so I remember the things that happened there quite well. Of course we didn't suffer much here compared to other parts of the country.

I always think of Halebourne Lane as a hamlet with its small bungalows interspersed with big houses. It was between the two villages of West End and Chobham and was built up during the 30s. As most of the couples had just got married and started their families there were 70 of us all at once! What bedlam! The ground for our bungalow, April Cot, was sold to my dad for £52 by Percy Wright. The bungalows were small, but several of the owners had evacuees as most of the nurserymen husbands were called up. They also grew all their own produce and kept rabbits and chickens. My Dad wasn't called up as he had a Reserved Occupation and worked at Weymann's of Addlestone building buses; he was, therefore, one of the 'Dad's Army' in the Brick Hill area of Valley End. Once he went on duty with his rifle barrel full of cornflour as mum had dropped it from the larder shelf above where dad leaned his rifle when not in use! My mum's 'evacuees' were members of Dad's family from London.

There were two stray bombs dropped in the orchard of Halebourne Lane making two huge craters side by side. It happened after May 1944 when my sister was born as I remember us all lying under Mum and Dad's bed and thinking, when the ENORMOUS bang occurred, that our house had been hit! We didn't have a Morrison Shelter (as Dad didn't believe in them) so it was very exciting to play in the ones in other houses. After the war it was quite common to see parts of them used for chicken runs etc! When the war ended glaziers came round to repair everyone's broken windows and the only one we needed doing was the one cracked by a boy in the lane with his catapult!! I've never seen so many people in Halebourne Lane all at once – it was just like the masses in the London Marathon!

We had a bomb scare whilst we were at Chobham St Lawrence's School one day (it was next to Jack Ledger's cycle shop before it was demolished) and I remember us all gathering in the cloakrooms until the danger had passed with a prefect (Brenda Dodd – Pam Gosden's cousin) on duty then. Whilst there, we also got our free brown paper bag containing 1lb of cocoa powder – from Canada I believe. Also, one of my Dad's sisters was instrumental in getting our family's name on a list somewhere for a free parcel from America in which were clothes and food and soap powder – very nice except that the soap powder and packet cocoa burst and covered themselves, in that order, over some loose sweets!! LOVELY – mmm! UGH!! Also, with the clothes – my sister and I made everyone think that two Shirley Temples had come to Chobham St Lawrence School!!

One of my mum's younger sisters also got 'luxury' foods for all the family in turn as she worked at the Dormy House in Sunningdale where all the Americans were. I can remember her bringing us a huge tin of pineapples; also the day when my mum managed to get our first bananas after the war.

'The Food Office' was often mentioned, and this was at Bagshot, which meant a bus ride there after we'd walked to West End first. Mum used to get her groceries from a Mr Herring whose shop was at Windlesham. He used to deliver our groceries (and Auntie

Eve's – who lived opposite us) in one the very few cars we ever saw around here. Mum's number with him was 3, so she, more or less, had first refusal of anything nice that he might be able to get – a tin of biscuits one Christmas I remember. She used to get dried egg which my sister loved and I hated. Then she had her name down at Page's of Camberley for nylons, so that when she heard from them we used to go there with her to get them, not understanding what all the fuss was about. Then I think - it was alright for us youngsters – we knew all about the situation but we weren't responsible for coping with it. Our parents had to manage with limited hot water, mangles, flat irons, no washing up liquid, no modern washing powder, cooking on the old black leaded kitchen range which was also our only heat and which we sat around listening to the wireless, primus and valour stoves, enamel ware, damp washing hanging everywhere and making the windows steam up (mum would spread it on the hedge on a fine day), no central heating, lino and stained floorboards with homemade rugs and (bliss!) NO television! Our Mums had only been married about 5 years when the war started and were plunged right in at the deep end! I wonder how we would have coped with no mod. cons and luxuries! I still had sweet coupons in the early fifties when at school in Guildford, I remember, so what with those and my friend's plentiful supply of money, we did alright for sweets!!

With all the men who were killed in the war from the village, only two were dads of my particular friends: Jim Lucock from Pennypot (who's widow married again and still lives in the same house) and Henry Lackey who had four sons, two of whom still live in West End. Their mother married again to Mr Mitchell and they were both members of the Old Folks Club, until she dies this time last year, sadly.

A 'must' of course, was the collection of our gas masks – we got these from a room at the Working Men's Club with an outside door which has now been bricked up. If you stand in their car park however, with 'Red Roofs' garden gate on your left, you can see where this door was – also where the bus shelter was as they were side by side. 'Mrs Ben' Gosden, so called to distinguish her from 'Mrs Bert' Gosden (who lived next door to John and Olive Underwood), was in charge of this distribution, and I remember getting my Mickey Mouse child's gas mask from her and another lady at that door. It was orange with a flap that fluttered with our breathing.

'Mrs Ben', the mother of Bob and John, the blacksmiths, was also the village post lady and delivered everywhere on her bicycle with the help of her sons who got pocket money for the 'trouble'. If there were any postcards, my dad told me, she always read them – so he was often greeted with the remark, 'Don't worry – they're alright'!

One of the ladies in the big houses by Halebourne, Miss Morton, used to organise teams of knitters, like my mum, to knit thick sweaters for the seamen and this kept her whole team very busy.

Prisoners of war

The Prisoner of War camp was at Brick Hill on the Chertsey Road, Windlesham section of the crossroads on Chobham Common near the Clump. After the war local families lived in these Nissen huts until the council houses were built. On the walls at each end of council cottages in Church Road and Windlesham Road there used to be

small circles at the apex in which there were swastikas, but, of course, they're no longer there now.

Our family used to have at least five of the Germans to tea on Sundays and I can still remember all their names. Two of them kept in touch with Mum and Dad until my parents' deaths. One of them did a pen and ink sketch for each of my two sisters and me which he put in frames which he had made himself. Sadly they are now gone. He also loved my younger sister as she was only a baby and he had left his baby daughter in Germany. Another one was 'so strong' to all the children as several of the boys would hang on his outstretched arm, but they never managed to pull it down.

West End was mainly nursery land up to the mid 50s and 60s so the prisoners used to work the land. Two West End girls, Eileen Underwood and Myrtle Chitty, married German prisoners as did one from Chobham – this latter one lived in a loft over Hillings buildings in their nursery in Halebourne Lane and cooked on a primus stove. She also had a side car fitted on her bike in which she transported her baby. On the roofs of those buildings were painted the names of Hillings etc, which had to be painted out during the war, of course. They didn't have a tractor, just four lovely carthorses – two brown and two white (Violet, Boxer, Nobby and Prince) – looked after by Tom Wallis who still lives in Benner Lane.

Halebourne

The stream, or 'water splash', at Halebourne was a ford then and we youngsters used to dam in up and swim in it. With the limited amount of traffic about we could play quite happily in the lane. Favourite games were dibs (five stones), skipping, hopscotch and 'tin can copper man' – an elaborate form of hide and seek.

One job the prisoners of war were given to do was clear the banks of the local streams – including the Halebourne Lane ford, and it really looked super – just for once. Not only are the banks overgrown now, but the cobbled ford (water splash) has long since gone now as it was piped under the new roadway that was built in the mid 50s – not nearly so picturesque. John Cherryman tells me the prisoners used to cycle to Bullhousen Farm to work as well.

At Halebourne we had two sweetshops because two local ladies had their front rooms converted. One was on the corner by the brick pillar box run by Mrs Charman (a prominent afternoon W. I member at West End) and the other opposite Pankhurst Farm opened by Mrs Green to keep her husband occupied during his terminal illness. There was no double wrapping then as we had our sweets served in a cone of newspaper.

Newspaper had other uses as well! Several families in the lane had flush toilets but most didn't and they buried the contents in their gardens. Although we had a bath in our house, sometimes we had to bath with thought and care because 'the cesspool was too full' if it had been raining, and then we only bathed once a week with a strip-down wash. The two local schools and halls had bucket lavatories until the 1950s.

Mr and Mrs John Straver lived in rooms over Mrs Charman's before the war and before they lived in Hollandia, beside the stream (after which they moved to Roselandia on the Bagshot Road, Chobham). He employed lots of Land Girls; one was my Dad's married sister who lived with us, and she had her second son eight days after Mrs Straver had Christopher. Another was my Mum's younger sister who married a Canadian and still lives there now with her family. Two more Land Girls lodged one each with Mr and Mrs George Tidbury and Mr and Mrs Arthur Tidbury, and a third was Rosie Rapley of Benner Lane.

Next door to us a Mr Wintour used to run a taxi service for which purpose he had a telephone and a huge Dodge car which always struck me as funny because he had no electricity, no hot water, no drains - only a galvanised standard-size bucket placed under the outlet pipe, no bathroom and a bucket lavatory. He did have gas however, and after the war he bought two caravans which he kept at a camp in Bognor for people to hire for their holidays. Our family went and I can still picture everybody sitting elbow to elbow in deck chairs on the beach and all the mums knitting!! Mustn't waste any time! On the telegraph pole outside Mr Wintour's house he had the blue sign with white letters stating 'you may telephone from here' and which his wife had promptly removed as John Straver's Land Girls were always on it to their boyfriends! We loved his car with its shiny, curved bumper which we all used to look in as it made us all look dumpy, like in the magic mirrors at the seaside. Three Chobham telephone numbers that have always stuck in my mind are:- Chobham 1 Belcher's Stores in the High Street, 89 John Straver's Nursery, and 318 Mr Wintour next door to us, which was always handy!

Halfway down Halebourne Lane, Blind Lane (a bridle path) leads to Rye Grove. We used to have picnics here and walk through a field of rabbits which looked over Windlesham (before it was built up) and a carpet of bluebells. We all called Blind Lane 'Gypsy Lane' because that was where they parked periodically in their gaily coloured romany vans. They used to call at our doors with their baskets of lace, lavender and clothes pegs, and collect old rags. They also used to work in the many nurseries in West End. We also had calls from turbaned Indians with their suitcases full of silk underwear, etc. The other callers were the oil man, the insurance man, the baker and grocer. A tinker also used to come around and Mum would get a washer put on a leaky saucepan.

My sisters and I shared a bedroom and, before our Dad made our bunk beds, a bed also. We all dried our hair in front of the range after putting vinegar in the rinsing water to make it shine. My friend was the eldest of six children and her family used to get the tin bath in front of the fire, fill it, and the females would bath in it first, followed by the males.

The husband of Mrs Charman, who ran one of the Halebourne sweet shops, had beehives in his garden. Sometimes we had swarms, such as the one outside Auntie's bedroom, which he shook gently into his box, wearing his gloves and a hat encircled with net. His brother lived in Bolting House Farm and had two sons called Ron and Ralph who delivered post and milk. The brother was very keen on cricket and gave all the lads lessons. His land is all built on now and there is a Bolding House Lane. Mr Medhurst, our local farmer, had pigs etc, and he had a mangold dicer which you operated by turning a handle (great fun) and he also had a 'box affair' which he used to use if we needed any pets put down – he'd keep the door firmly closed with his foot. One year, we had our November 5th bonfire night beside Halebourne, and Mr Coombes, who was in charge of

the fireworks, put a lovely display of them on a small raft and floated them downstream. The sight was magical and has stayed with me every since. He also made us all a 'mangold' face on a pole with a lighted candle inside which thrilled us, naturally. Mum was 'thrilled' when she saw all the candle grease down our coats!!

In about 1948 a garden party was held in the grounds of Halebourne House and Kim and Kay Kendall were there as celebrities, along with Philip Slessor (producer of Much-Binding-in-the Marsh). I got the autograph of the latter as he was standing alone under a tree, learning on a stick, and looking bored!! When Kay picked up a tiny dog to announce him 'the winner' he pee-d down her posh dress – or was it 'frock' in those days!! – which caused much laughter, of course, especially from Kay Kendall herself. The winner of the ankle competition was Iris Spong – 'Mrs Sponge' is what the M.C announced!! I also won a bottle of smelling salts which I gave to my Nan. Nan used to do our boiling of clothes in her copper and then ride with a bag full of laundered linen from Windlesham to us on her shiny bicycle (approximately 3 miles). Nan's house gleamed from top to bottom – her white copper, the 3 white steps at her front door, the brass 'copper' tap, her letterbox and 'circle' for her Yale lock, her glass-like lino she 'did' every day. I don't QUITE take after her!! Mrs Cheeseman, our neighbour, also did laundry for people and she had the same sized bungalow as we all had - a kitchen, a front room and 2 bedrooms.

The Victory party

The first time the Halebourne children had ice cream was when Mr Charlie Harris (the father of Pauline Smith of Benner Lane) bought us all some as 'afters' at our Victory party held in the lane outside Mr Wintour's house on his grass verge. All the mums in the lane contributed food and Mrs George Tidbury ingeniously made her own raffle tickets by making perforations with her 'cottonless' sewing machine. We had a really super fancy dress parade – I was Old Mother Hubbard, Mave (my middle sister) was Baby Bunting and Liz Fox (my 'baby' sister) who could just toddle, was one of the seven dwarfs with little rosy cheeks, wearing a green 'siren' suit and carrying her 'lunch' tied to the end of a stick over her shoulder.

At another fancy dress parade held at the Gordon Boys Home, my cousin won first prize 'dressed' in fresh vegetables and parading as 'Dig for Victory'.

Chobham and its shops

My Mum used to get her bread and meat in Chobham at Mitchell's (Christmas's) and Grimditch (Mr Crawley's) next to the church. The weekend joint for our family was 5/6p and our bread bill for the week was 3/3¾d. This shopping was done by my sister and I and although we knew how much the bread was we used to ask Miss Tanner EVERY week just to hear her say '3 and 3.3'. It was delivered by Arthur Brooking (our postman now).

Our milk was delivered by horse and cart and it had cardboard tops on it with a small round hole in the centre. These, when washed, were worked round with raffia and then all sewn together, and then lined, and made into shopping bags with raffia-bound handles. That was when Chobham really was a village, I feel.

The row of houses opposite the White Hart are still the same, as is Barclays Bank. Next to that was Mitchell's Bakery then Adamson's the jewellers. Henrietta's Ladies Dress Shop replaced Elsey's which had a display of iron implements in its window. Next to Adamson's was the house of a couple who were responsible for loads of stray dogs who used to be let loose in the big yard (I believe they were connected with the RSPCA). The next establishment was Mr Lascelle's Grocery Shop where he also sold bread. He used to go around in a van and deliver his bread from a huge basket over his arm and covered in a white cloth. He was a very tiny man, hardly bigger than his basket! He was on one side of an alley way to the cemetery and schools and Mr Welland was on the other. He made absolutely DELICIOUS buns which were soft, light brown and left just like that to eat, whereas Mitchell's buns were glazed and not nearly as nice in my opinion. The smaller ones were ½d each and the bigger ones 1d. There was a private house after Mr Welland's then there was a pub, The Sun, which was traditional, but then change its image to a smarter hostelry recently, with its car park. The next shop was the double fronted 'Belcher's'; one side was grocery and the other side drapery. Where John's the Hairdressers etc now is there was The King's Head which was run by Edlins.

Opposite was Rootham's Antiques; then next to them, going back up the street, was a dairy run by Mr and Mrs Evans; also the telephone exchange. Before being where it is now, Chobham Post Office was next (then it moved round where Arthur Lord Organs is) when the premises were turned into the Queen Anne Restaurant. Then came the Horse and Groom (which has now gone) and between this pub and the church was Grimditch's Butchers. After the White Hart pub was Mr Medhurst's stationery (now a chemist's) then a chemist's followed by Gas (or Electricity) showrooms. Then came a snack bar where they sold SUPER ice lollies, and Robinson's shoe menders. The rest of the premises on that side were all F. W. Benham's, including the separate shop on that side, before 'Sadler's Halt', which was the greengrocery department.

He also had a corn store opposite the green in Bagshot Road (where new shops are now); then came St Lawrence School which has been replaced by St Lawrence flats, one of which is owned by Miss Morris, the deputy head. We attended school here. We arrived on the bus but had to walk home as it only ran every 1½ hours: approximately 2 miles. The Doctor's surgery was the little cottage in the corner of the green, almost next to the Bourne, where you could sit for ages as they didn't have an appointments system then. Next to the school, which only had 5 classrooms for the juniors and the seniors of the village, there was Jack Ledger's bicycle repair shop. He was marvellous as often your bill for parts was more than for his labour. Next came Mr and Mrs Coleman's house – he was the local undertaker and his chapel was between the garage and the police station. He had a garage for the hearse behind the infant school and down the alley opposite the church.

In the 40s at Chobham a film crew shot the scenes from a St Trinian's film, and managed to do it on a Wednesday afternoon as that was half day closing!! They also shot the film 'Danger Within' at Chobham Clump with several very famous names. When we eventually saw it in a Woking cinema (there were three then – the Ritz, the Odeon and the Plaza) the film opened with several stars laying in the sun and the caption underneath stated 'Italy 1944' which caused much laughter and cheering. Also the film 'A Kid for two Farthings', starring Diana Dors, was shot in Windlesham at Twelve Oaks Farm.

West End

In West End, in the Wheatsheaf yard, was a coal merchant's business, and opposite, just a bit further down, is still, but not for much longer, a smithy, both owned by a Mr Gosden. There were several big families in the village, namely Gosden, Spong, Glazier, Rapley, Cheeseman and Daborn. The Working Men's Club is drastically altered from what it was when built in 1927. Several cottages in the village are nearly 100 years old as they have names and dates on the front. These properties have wells in their gardens which have mostly all been filled in. One in a terrace of four cottages housed a family with 13 children!

There were two properties in the Wheatsheaf yard called Dorothy and Edna cottages which have now been replaced by a terrace of shops called 'Dorna House'. Another pair were also there, one the offices of C. B. Fellows and Son (builders) and the other the Doctors' Surgery. Edna and Dorothy cottages held the café of the Berrys where Vic used to serve teas to the bus conductors and drivers when they had 20 minutes break before doing the return journey. He married one of the conductresses.

Down Brentmoor Road next to the Hare and Hounds the parade of shops were a butchers, a drapers, a greengrocery and grocers (Benham's). At one time the butchers was run by Charlie Hart, and his sister Sybil played the church organ and also the piano for the Olde Time Dancers in the Men's Club. The green opposite the Hare and Hounds was at one time the village green as our present one was covered in gorse. It was here where the fair came annually. My parents met here – my Mum came from Windlesham.

Patel's shop in West End used to be owned by the Allen family, Frank and his two spinster sisters. It was vastly different then than it is today – for one thing it was very dark and they had several haberdashery items hanging behind the door which you could see from outside, namely cards of buttons, needles, pins, elastic, hair nets etc.

We younger ones used to see our films in the Men's Club where a mobile unit used to visit West End, weekly, every Thursday. It visited other areas around on their special night. The whirr of the thing was nearly as loud as the dialogue. There was also a cinema in Bagshot.

There was a man who 'charged' your accumulators. He lived in Donkey Town which was a cluster of hovels with two rooms and dirt floors which the original settlers erected for permanence after roaming. A number of other villagers built themselves wooden shacks which were usually on a large area of ground for cultivating.

In 1948 the villagers lined the A322 as we all watched the Olympic runner carrying the torch through West End. What a thrill! He was at the top of the 'Gordon Boys' hill where at one time there was an unimpeded view through the gorse to the Hare and Hounds, which of course has gone now. Also in that year I remember visiting the 'Gordon Boys' open day where in the carpentry room there was on display the farm wagon complete with shafts and wooden wheels – a beautiful thing. They also had a cobblers section and a tailors where they made their own uniforms. The fabric was much thicker than it is

today and they had to wear their uniforms all the time whereas they don't now. Their 'blues' are worn on special occasions and their uniform is now grey trousers and green blazers. In 1985 the Queen, who is patron, and Prince Phillip visited the Gordon's school to celebrate its 100 years.

They now also have a tuck shop in the school whereas before they all used to get their sweets and pop from 'Johnnie Bull's' as they called the little shop on the corner of the road by Windlemere Golf Club. Mr Bull had a long white flowing beard and he also wore a cap. The building is still there but it now has a bow window and, or course, the advertising metal sheets have gone with their Lyons Tea etc on them. Just down from Johnnie Bull's was a very smart wooden scouts hut built by the boys of my Dad's generation which is sadly no more.

On the A319 was the West End vicarage which is now Mulberry House. Just past there on the junction of Hookstone Lane and the A319 was a 'proper' farm which bears no resemblance to the property there now. We used to be able to see (and smell!) the pigs there and see the round tall dome for the silage. Mr Medhurst and his three daughters lived in the mellow ffarmhouse and about 100 yards past there was a pair of shacks with roofs of corrugated iron. Now they are whitewashed and have thatched roofs and have increased their value dramatically, being presented as 'two cottages'.

On the corner of Birch Lane there was once a chapel; and West End W.I. hall was transported to West End after serving as a soldiers' chapel in Sunningdale. Lucas Green Manor was once owned by a Mr G. V. Bridgewater who once owned the company making Bridgewater's biscuits. Before Mr Dudley Glanfield owned Twelve Oaks Farm in Windlesham a Mr Lawrence lived there and died at the age of 104. When he owned it all the lodges were inhabited, but now most of them are derelict and overgrown. There were two in Halebourne Lane and some in Rye Grove.

Most gardens consisted of a front lawn and a prolific vegetable garden at the rear. Several men in West End worked their gardens as well as cycling to Addlestone and back every day to work. My Dad was doing exams when we were young and this involved him spreading out his drawings on our kitchen table and yelling at us if we splashed his work whilst we were washing at the kitchen sink which was in the same room!

Most of the roads in West End were unmade tracks, and I can still picture the road from West End to Bagshot. It was so uncomplicated; and Blackstroud Lane was in one piece – before the by-pass.

Before the schools did their own catering, a canteen in Byfleet cooked all the meals and transported them every day to all the schools in the area.

When we walked home from school we used to see two nannies in uniform, one from Chobham Vicarage and the other from a big house called 'Little Langley'. This latter lady used to be Brown Owl at Chobham.

In the 40s and 50s West End School used to hold a May Day ceremony and all the children danced around the maypole; and each year a new May Queen was chosen. It meant a lot of sewing, especially for the then headmaster's wife.

There are four barrows on New England Hill which used to be quite clear apparently, until the boys of my generation partially flattened them with their dirt track cycling on their speedway bikes.

In 1952 I can remember one of my friends from Brookwood saying she had travelled on the Bisley Bullet the day before, as it was the last trip on the Bisley/Brookwood line before it closed down. They were able to get on and off during the journey as the train was going so slowly!

At one time I used to know everyone in West End but not now, as most of the fields and nurseries have been built on. Sad, but such is progress.