

Anne White

I was born in one of the little cottages in the Chemical Yard, Totley in 1941. My parents were Annie and Albert Russell and I was the youngest of their children. I had an older brother Kenneth and a sister, Audrey. Even as a very young child, I always felt that, somehow, I was very lucky and privileged to live in such a beautiful place. I always felt so happy and safe wandering around the fields and open countryside around our home and I learnt all about the animals and flowers which were part of my 'little world'. I could write a book about my many memories of my childhood and I only wish that I had the time to do so.

Despite the fact that our family seemed to be plagued by many personal tragedies, I recall my childhood days as being happy and contented. Our home was just a small cottage with only two bedrooms and no hot water; there was an outside toilet at the bottom of the garden which we shared with our neighbours. My parents were hardworking people, they never seemed to stop, they strived to be self-sufficient and they had a fierce pride in their appearance and conduct. They taught us good manners, politeness and kindness to others and they provided many guidelines for the behaviour they expected from us which laid a firm foundation for the rest of our lives. Most importantly, our home was always filled with love.

All my grandparents had died before I was born although I did have a step-gran who I will always remember with love and gratitude because she cared for me and fed me when my world was falling apart. I have led a very full and active life, and still do, I decided recently that I would add to my list of many hobbies and would try to research some of my family's ancestry. I began with my mother's side of the family. I knew her maiden name was Barber and, of course, I know the names of her siblings. I discovered that my grandfather's name was Thomas and my grandmother's name was Hannah. Just having this small scrap of information made me see them as 'real' people and I am extremely keen to find out more.

According to the 1901 census, my grandfather was living at home with his father and mother and younger brother at No: 11 Totley Rise. It's a long time ago since I used to know this area well, so, last Sunday; we decided to drive to this row of houses to see if we could identify No: 11. I remember the beginning of 'The Rise' as Topham's the newsagents, his shop and the houses adjoining it are now business premises which I think begin with No: 15 so what has happened to No: 11 I wonder?

My partner Dennis and my daughter and grandson went for a walk down the back lane to have a look around the area where I used to live. I didn't want to go, I know that many changes have taken place and I think that I would have found the whole experience too upsetting. On their travels they stopped to speak with a lady who lives on the road leading out of The Chemical Yard and onto Queen Victoria Road. She was very interested in their reasons for being there and she kindly gave them a copy of the February Issue of The Totley Independent. What a coincidence that this issue has an old photo of the houses at the bottom of Totley Rise on its front page!

This has prompted me to write this letter to you. It's quite difficult to know just how much information I can write in one single letter. I have decided that my best approach is to write as much as I can remember about The Chemical Yard and the people who lived there when I was a child. I am certainly not an artist but I will draft out a rough drawing of the surroundings to help to illustrate my memories.

The houses were not numbered but I will number them so that they can be identified.

In cottage No: 1 lived a family who we referred to as the Gutsers but I believe they were probably called Goodsirs. There was Mr and Mrs Goodsir and their son Joseph. When I was about 10 or 11 yrs old they left and a family by the name of Hanwell moved in. There were Mr and Mrs Hanwell and their sons Clive and David. They had moved from Heeley and Mrs Hanwell

hated living in the 'countryside'. She complained about the mud from the back lane which was just a rough track way back then and she told my mum that she couldn't wait to go back to 'civilisation' with its tarmacked paths etc. I became good friends with David who was just a little bit older than me and I showed him the many walks to be explored and all the fun and exciting places to play.

In cottage No: 2 lived the Nicholson family, the parents had about nine children. Their twin daughters Pamela and Mary were just a fortnight younger than me and I loved playing with them. We all attended Totley All Saints Church of England School, in those days, it was rare for a parent to accompany their children to school and I often came home from school on foot and using different routes. One day, when I was 6/7yrs old, I was coming home with the twins and we were using the bus. As it pulled up at the top of Totley Rise there was a resident waiting there who spoke to the twins and said they had to go with her to her house. I felt very puzzled as I walked home alone. We heard later that the twin's younger brothers, also twins, and only aged five, had been on the previous bus. They had crossed the main road then attempted to cross Glover Road. I'm ashamed to say that I cannot remember their names; I think they were called Colin and Edward but one of them had been run over and had died. I remember the day of the funeral and seeing a table in the Nicholson's house laden down with lovely food. As a child it seemed strange to me that people would want to eat on such a sad day. Still, that's how children see the world around them and try to understand it.

When I was 10yrs old the Nicholson family left their cottage. I was heartbroken and cried and cried; I thought my world had come to an end and couldn't envisage a future without Pamela and Mary. Mr and Mrs Markham moved into their cottage with their son Stephen.

Next door to them, at No: 3, lived my step-gran Ada Barber and one of her sons, my Uncle Tom.

The end of the row of cottages, No: 4 was occupied by an elderly gentleman living on his own called Mr Thompson. I know that he was related to the family of Thompson's the butchers but I'm not sure of the relationship. To me, Mr Thompson seemed very old, he walked with a stick and I believe that he suffered from gout. He didn't have electricity in his home and he would sit at a large wooden table in front of his window with a candle burning in front of him. This cast strange shadows across his face at night-time and I must admit that this terrified me. Sometimes, during the day, he would call to me and ask me to run an errand to the local shops for him. We were used to being asked by our neighbours to go shopping for

them, it was the way life was back then. He would reward me with a half-penny if he was feeling generous that day! One morning, he was discovered lying on the floor of his cottage unable to get to his feet. My mum and our neighbour Mrs Stanway looked after him and I remember seeing my mum making his fire for him in his old Yorkshire range and cooking fried eggs and bacon for his breakfast. The local doctor came and said Mr Thompson had to go into hospital. I never saw him again and, not long after, his cottage was occupied by the Pashley family. Jean Pashley became very good friends with my mum. She and her husband became parents to Dianne and Richard and I would baby-sit for them when I was about 13yrs old.

At the end of the row of cottages were the outside toilets. I can't remember how many there were but I think there may have been three, each one to be shared by two families?

All the cottages I have mentioned didn't have back doors and the river ran along the back of them.

My parent's cottage stood well back from the river and we had a long front garden. We also had a long garden at the side which contained a greenhouse, sheds, gooseberry, raspberry, blackcurrant and redcurrant plants and the old air-raid shelter which we used for storage. Across the river was a little wooden bridge which my father had made and that gave us access to the land adjoining the back lane which my father rented from the Thompson's. He built a pigsty here and grew vegetables on part of the land. I have written some of my dad's life story which was published about two years ago in a book called 'Earning a Living' which is still available from a book shop on Surrey Street which specializes in local history.

Our cottage was called North West Cottage and our neighbours were Mr and Mrs Stanway and their son Eddie. In time, Eddie married a lady called Winnie and she moved into the cottage, they later had a daughter, Susan and a son, Robert. After a few years Mr and Mrs Stanway moved to another cottage in Totley.

These are my earliest memories of The Chemical Yard until the late-fifties, nothing lasts forever and many changes were due to take place.

On 12th March 1955, my brother married and left home, on 26th March 1955 my sister also married and she too left home. Our lovely mum died in August the same year so, in just one year, we went from having five people living at home to only two, myself and my dad. Just a few weeks later we discovered that our dad had terminal cancer and only had a few months left to live. He was such a proud and strong man and we didn't tell him although I'm sure that he was aware of how ill he was. He had rented our cottage from Mr Marcroft (Colin or Philip?) who owned a building company within The Chemical Yard. Mr Marcroft was having financial problems and he offered all his tenants in the yard the opportunity to buy their homes from him.

Now, my dad was a working class man who had never seen himself as a property owner. He had enough savings to buy but was unsure about what he should do. We had a good friend, Mr Sutcliffe, who lived on Whirlowdale Road at Millhouses and my dad sought his advice. As a result my dad invested his life savings and bought our cottage for the princely sum of £100!

All the other residents bought their homes too.

Dad's illness meant that he spent time in and out of hospital and I lived in our cottage on my own with just our dog to keep me company. This is when my gran came to my rescue. She would have a meal ready for me when I returned home late at night after visiting my dad. Because of our circumstances I left school in July 1956 when I was 14yrs old and I had to wait until August when I became 15yrs old and could start working in the offices at Laycock's Engineering Company on Archer Road.

In April 1957 my dad died. At his request, my sister and her husband were going to live in the cottage and I would live with them. Audrey and her husband Peter decided that they would have the cottage modernized before they moved in. They had all the walls and ceiling re-plastered plus a new concrete floor, our dad had already had the old Yorkshire Range replaced with a smart, new, marble-tiled fireplace. The electrics were renewed and the kitchen modernized also all the bedrooms re-decorated. Of course, all this work took a long time and I lived in the house on my own while the alterations were taking place. My gran fed me and I sometimes slept at her home.

Eventually, at Christmas 1957, Audrey and Peter moved in. The cottage looked lovely as they had bought all new furniture and carpets and had the alcoves in the living room lined with mirror tiles and concealed lighting. What a transformation! Life there should have been idyllic but, just a few months later, in July 1958, we awoke one morning to a deathly silence. The first thing that I realized was that I couldn't hear the birds singing and something seemed



very wrong. Our cottage had become the victim of sever flooding, the tranquil little stream which ran at the bottom of the garden had burst its banks and flooded all the cottages. If I were to write a book then this event alone would require a chapter of its own.

In December of the same year, 1958, at the tender age of seventeen, I was married at Totley All Saints Church in a very simple wedding ceremony. The church had a stone floor, but, just a week before I was due to be married, a brand new red carpet was fitted and I was the first bride to walk on it down the aisle! I moved with my new husband to shared rented accommodation in Raleigh Road at Heeley.

As a result of the freak flooding of the cottages, all the owners were told by the council that their homes had been built too close to the river and they would have to be demolished.

Disheartened by the destruction of all their new furnishings and belongings and all the sad events that had happened, my sister didn't oppose the council's decision and she and Peter moved to Lowedges to a modern house with all mod-cons. All the other residents decided to move too. Our Gran had experienced the flood but had since died. Ironically, the only people to officially object to their home being demolished were the Hanwell family, they won their case and I believe that their cottage still stands today with strong fortifications in case of further flooding.

I have written my memories with happiness, sadness and great nostalgia. I have many more stories to tell so if you find that your readers are interested in my recollections then I will happily send my stories to you. I am hoping that my family will treasure them and enjoy reading them. I have tried my utmost to be as accurate as possible and hope that I have succeeded.

Anne White

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