

Square memories

Margaret Till (née Levetus) lived with her parents and brother at 1 North Square from the mid thirties to the early fifties.

These edited extracts from her recent correspondence with the present occupier, Andrew Botterill (reproduced E&OE with Margaret's kind permission) detail some youthful recollections of the Square's characters and life in the Suburb. Margaret was an art school student before going on to become a book-jacket designer and illustrator (which included commissions for the 'Radio Times') and, later, a teacher. She moved away from the Suburb in 1951 and has lived for many years in Durham with her husband, Roger, and family.

We came to the Suburb in 1924, living until 1932 at 2 Turner's Wood. After a couple of years at Swiss Cottage, my parents, Edward and Gertrude Levetus bought No. 1 North Square in 1934 (for £2,850). I was 15. We were very happy there.

At that time, Central Square was very formally laid out with the trees clipped into square shapes. Not very appealing to children who prefer jungles. The triangle of wild territory near the garages now incorporated into the garden of No.1 used to be a favourite play area for Henrietta Barnett girls during their lunch hour. I remember overhearing them playing 'Swallows and Amazons'.

Lucien Pissarro (who had come to live in England in 1890) and his wife Esther were old



friends of my parents. They lived in Hammersmith and visited us occasionally. Family tradition has it that my father's sister, Celia, was the first of our family to get to know the Pissarros, being introduced to them in the Café Royal on Mafeking night.

During the war, fuel rationing meant no central heating. There was a coke boiler in the kitchen for hot water and a gas 'geyser' in the one bathroom in case the coke boiler went out. In cold weather we'd rush to the airing cupboard on the first floor landing and hug the hot water cylinder.

At the beginning of the war, a trench was dug in the lawn for us and our neighbours to huddle in during air raids. Fortunately it was never used. The Allmands at No. 5 had a Morrison shelter (a large steel table) in their dining room. Later, my parents fortified the kitchen with supports and beams and shutters inside the windows. During the Blitz we spent most nights on camp beds in the kitchen, listening to various kinds of bangs. On the worst night a really big bomb came down on Willifield Way.

It wasn't until I read the recent article in *Suburb News* about the Memorial Gate that I realized how many Suburb civilians had died in air raids. At

the time, these facts were not published as far as I know. We did however know about Michael Rennie, whom I remember, the elder son of the Vicar of St Jude's. He died when the 'City of Benares' was torpedoed.

We were all immensely impressed by the courage and persistence of the van driver who delivered bread to the Square throughout the Blitz. Amid searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, he would unflinchingly turn up at the door with our loaves. I think he deserved the George Medal.

My mother attended some ARP meetings at the Institute where instructions were given about how to cope with various emergencies.

We also had fire-watching rotas so that there would always be somebody awake to rouse the neighbourhood in case of fire bombs. It was through fire-watching that we got to know Leon and Winnie Stevens who lived at 3 Hill Close and it was in their garden in 1947 that I met Roger Till under an apple tree. So one thing leads to another!

Later in the war my mother kept 6 hens in the garden (forbidden in peacetime in the Suburb!) and so got a welcome supply of fresh eggs.

In 1939, we took in a German half-Jewish girl aged 16. Gerda had the top floor room at the front and trained as a nurse at Guy's (the only profession open to 'enemy aliens' at the time). She later married a very nice Polish Jew who had reached England after hair raising escapes from the Germans and Russians. Sadly, he died some years ago but Gerda lives on near Child's Hill.

I remember the Herrmanns when they first arrived at No. 14 North Square after fleeing Germany because they were partly Jewish (as I am, through my father's family). The Square gave them neighbourly support especially when Gabi had the 'flu and Fritz was carted off to internment. Eventually things improved: Fritz returned, the boys grew and flourished and they moved to No. 4. Fritz was an architect. His father had been quite a well known painter in Germany. Fritz bought a Camille Pissarro painting from Lucien. The boys, too, appreciated paintings: Luke became Professor of Art History at Leicester University. Frank's career covered writing, publishing and a directorship at Sotheby's.

Before the Herrmanns moved to No. 4, a Dutch couple lived there – the Count and Countess van Limbourg Stirum who were content to be known as Mr and Mrs Limbourg.

No.5 was occupied by Professor Allmand (Chemistry, Kings College, London), his French wife and their 3 children, Marguerite (2 years younger than me), Michael and Christopher who went on to become a Professor at Liverpool University. The family spoke French at home and the children were bi-lingual. Mrs Allmand had a fascinating French accent which she never lost. Her father (known to all of us as Grandpère) used to come to stay at No.5. Once, the Allmands gave or lent us something and my father sent a thank you note in verse. This unleashed a spring in Grandpère who had not previously written in verse and henceforth there came from him a spate of French poems on many subjects. I've still got some of them.

Marguerite read Modern Languages at London University. During the war she was in the ATS. and worked at Bletchley. Afterwards she married a very nice, cheerful civil servant and had 4 children. Now widowed, she still lives in the Suburb. Michael went to Ampleforth then on to Oriel College, Oxford. He joined the army and was killed in the Far East. He was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. When this was announced, reporters thronged the Square, besieging the Allmand family and trying to get stories about Michael from neighbours. The reporters spotted my mother going next door to No.2 to speak to Lady Millar Craig and waited to pounce when she came out again. They waited in vain as she returned to our house through a little door on the top floor which had been installed by our predecessor, Mrs Olivia Kennedy, so that her daughter could get through to play with the Millar Craig children next door without having to go outside.

The Millar Craigs were followed at No.2 by the Campbells then by a Mrs Webster and her son John who was a BBC announcer. The Sharpey-Schaeffers came in about 1950. We all liked Sheila very much (Sheila later married again, to John McMichael, another 'medical knight', and died 6 years ago).

We never really got to know the people at No.3. I think it was inhabited by a lady who was prominent in the Play and Pageant Union. Does the P&PU still exist? It used to put on open air Shakespeare plays in Little Wood and also others indoors at the Institute. I remember designing and painting scenery for 'The Sulky Fire' in 1946. The producer was Michael Flanders who lived in Heath Close.

The Turner family lived at No.6. I think it must have been before the war as they had young children and these were very scarce in the Suburb during the war – they were nearly all evacuated. I remember John Turner, aged about 10. He was a mechanical and electrical genius. He once came to our house, adjusted our wireless set then went back to No.6 and used his home made apparatus to broadcast to us.

In the thirties, No.7 housed the Hobmans whose son, David, later devoted his life with great effect to Age Concern. They were replaced by the Kauffmanns – Rosalind, widow of Dr Otto Kauffmann and her teenage children, Edward, Benny and Francesca – who moved to the Suburb from Birmingham. We all became close friends. Tragically, both boys were killed in the war, Edward at Tobruk in 1942 and Benny at Osnabruck in 1945. Francesca died after a car accident in 1963. Rosalind (known to us as 'Kauffie') lived on at No.7 cared for by a housekeeper and visited by neighbours, somehow managing to retain her spirited approach to life. She died in 1981 aged 98.

Mrs Warburg lived at No.8 with her 3 sons. She had been married to a publisher (Secker & Warburg). They were followed, during the war, by the Chapmans and their 3 sons, John (who later wrote Whitehall farces), David and Paul. I remember taking David together with Christopher Allmand to a wartime concert at the National Gallery. After them came the composer William Alwyn and his wife and 2 sons, Jonathan and Nicholas.

Another musician, living just around the corner at No.1 Erskine Hill, was the violinist David McCallum, leader of the London Philharmonic. I painted a picture of him playing his violin in our sitting room. His son, Keith, became a film star. He used the name David McCallum and became best known, perhaps, for the TV series 'The Man from U.N.C.L.E.'. 'The only time I saw Keith on a stage in the Suburb was when, as a boy, he recited Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

Before the war, No.9 North Square was owned by Colonel Ronald Maude. He was a director of Car Mart, agents for Standard cars, and sold one to my father. He was also an Equerry to the Duke of Gloucester so occasionally moved in royal circles.

At No 10 in the late thirties there lived Mrs Tout and her son Herbert. She was the widow of Professor Tout, a Manchester University historian. Gordon Robbins (of Benn's, the publishers) lived at No.11 with his family. His grandson James is, I am sure, the BBC reporter who has appeared

on TV. There is certainly a strong family likeness.

Finally, in the 'Studio' in the far corner of the Square, lived the artist Fred Taylor who designed posters for LNER. My first sight of Durham Cathedral was in one of them. He was very kind and helpful to me in art matters.

My mother lived on at No.1 after my father's death until 1952 when she moved to 72 Hampstead Way. One year before, a family friend, Frank Ballard the Minister of the Free Church officiated at my marriage. I married Roger Till whom I'd first met under the apple tree in the Stevens' garden.



Leonie Stephen and David McCallum in the Speedwell Player's 'Festival Time' around 1950



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