

# Romsey Town, Cambridge, in the 1960s:

## Alison's story

Interview by Allan Brigham 2006

Romsey Town was built between 1880 and 1900. Although it is now part of inner Cambridge, at the time it would have been in the language of a century later an 'urban extension' on a 'greenfield site'. The development of the township was plagued by disputes about basic infrastructure, but despite both the area and the inhabitants being seen as beyond the pale by those living in central Cambridge within a generation it had developed into a strong, vibrant and independent community of 7,000 people. This now vanished history and the impact on the community of recent social and economic changes are traced in *'Bringing it all back home'* (details below).

Alison's childhood memories are part of this story and give a flavour of life in Romsey in the 1960s. Children still played on the streets (despite the flasher), neighbours were neighbourly, wives stayed at home bound to childcare, cooking and housework, while husbands came home for lunch. The interview captures the decade when The Bathhouse at Gwydir Street was still used for baths, the side streets were empty of cars, phones were luxuries, there was a bowling alley on Mill Road, and Tesco's had only recently opened its first local store in Regent Street. There was trust and 'good times', but as Alison says 'they can say it was happier, but I'm sure it must have been much harder.'

Alison's mother was born in Hemingford Road, Romsey Town. Her father had been Head Porter at Queen's College before becoming a milkman for local dairy 'Goodrum's, also in Hemingford Road.

Alison's father was Welsh, and came to Cambridge after being stationed in Norfolk in World War II. He was a painter and decorator and worked for the Colleges before getting a job with Cambridge Water Company. He met Alison's mother at The Embassy Ballroom on Mill Road. At the start of their marriage they lived as an extended family with Alison's parents in Hemingford Road, but in the crowded house *'they just didn't get on, it was my granddads rules or no rules'*. A holiday back in Wales resulted in a family gift of £65 as a deposit for their own home, and the young couple moved into Great Eastern Street, Romsey Town, in 1954. The house cost £625. Alison was born there in 1959.

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### The House

'The front door opened straight in off the path. We always went round the back. We had the front room, which was the 'tidy room'. For when people came. You weren't allowed in it often, everybody was in the middle room. We

had a middle room which we ate in, but everybody kind of lived in there. And a kitchen.

The first things I can remember about our house was nothing, we didn't have anything much. The kitchen was very stark, we had a cooker, and one of those cabinets, everyone had a cabinet, with a fold down flap, you made your sandwiches and everything on that. We had a gas fridge, that's something else that really sticks in my mind, we had a gas cooker and a gas fridge, because I've never seen a gas fridge since.

Three bedrooms, with separate bedrooms. The middle room did lead off into the back room, but my dad put a partition along there, as I had two elder brothers, and then there was me, so I didn't have to walk through their room. I had the little bedroom at the back. I can never remember being cold, but we never had any heating upstairs. None at all, there just wasn't. And you didn't have double glazing or central heating.'

### **Baths & Toilets:**

'We didn't even have a bathroom, that's another thing I can remember. I had two elder brothers, [but I went in first] so I always got the clean water. In the tin bath that hung up out the back, in front of the fire.

We used to go over the bridge to the Baths [at Gwydir Street], when I was older. You'd go there on a Sunday. There were baths, there was a woman there, and you had a little individual cubicle, and you could shout if you wanted more water, I think she supplied soap and a towel. But of course by then we'd all discovered that the swimming pool was much easier [Parkside swimming pool: opened 1963]! You'd have a shower after the swimming pool. It's awful, it's hard to believe! Nobody else had it any different to how we did, its how it was.

We didn't even have an inside toilet, we had an outside toilet. If we went to the loo in the night we had a potty. I think we emptied it, or maybe Mum did when we were little. It was a brick toilet, painted black and white with just a loo in it. And I can remember we didn't even have soft paper, it was lzal, on a big old slippy roll, it was never no good was it ?!'

### **Laundry**

'Mum did it all by hand. We didn't have a washing machine, there was a Butler sink, and I can remember being out the back with my mum and she would get me to turn the handle on a mangle, and that's how bold it was then.

In our middle room, what wasn't the posh room, I remember we had a pulley, over the fire, and we used to load that up with the laundry, I don't know what you call them, she used to call it 'the pulley', it was a sort of stringy thing that you pulled up – it had two wheels in the ceiling, and you hoycked it up and all the clothes dried over the fire. We had coal fires to start ....

I remember a woman down the road called Hilda, she got this little square washing machine, and that's all it was, a square washing machine, and it has a mangle, an automatic mangle on the top. And she used to do her washing, because she lived on her own, on a Monday.

And then other times I can see myself pushing this square washing machine from Hilda's to our house so that we could borrow it . And that was amazing, it had a separate spinner, so the clothes were washed, and there was this automatic mangle on the top, then you spun them out afterwards.

You wouldn't do that now, I wouldn't want to! It was hard, I'm sure it was very hard for my Mum.'

### **Meal time:**

'There was no such thing as a Take Away. I don't remember pizzas, I don't remember anything like that. We certainly never had a curry, never had anything like that. It was always dinner, up the table when Dad came home, 5.30. Always. Always meat and two veg, always, proper dinner.'

### **Shopping:**

'Your vegetables always came from Alec on The Broadway. You went to the butchers for meat, and you went to 'Howes' for bread, and I don't remember a big shop until a lot later, and then mum had one of them silly trolleys, and we used to have to walk across Parkers Piece to 'Tesco', that was 8.00 I think they closed on a Thursday night, so after my dad had got paid we used to have to go over to 'Tesco' [ Tesco: opened 1964, today Mandela House] . But everything was local.

But you brought home fresh most days didn't you, you didn't do a week's shopping...You got your food along the road. But then nobody had a car to go any further anyway. Everything you needed you could get within walking distance.'

### **Home Improvements:**

'The two rooms [downstairs] were knocked into one [about 1980]. The kitchen was obviously a fitted kitchen by then. We had a conservatory put on at the back, not a proper conservatory, a lean-to. I was probably about ten, late '60s. It was all storage. It was just lined up with cupboards.... I think our snake lived out there, we had a pet snake, a grass snake, Norman. My Dad was always frightened to death about it! Somebody gave it to us I think. It used to really smell if you upset it! Dad was petrified.

My brother did [the bathroom] when he was 17 [about 1970]. He was an apprentice plumber, and him and my Dad and his boss, the bathroom was put in. But it was never a proper bathroom, because it led from the kitchen, there was never two doors, that's the law now isn't it.'

### **The Street**

'The only car I can ever remember down our road was across the road from us, There was a man called Mr Bowman, and he only had one leg., and he

had one of them little blue [disabled] cars. If ever there was an emergency we had to go across the road to Mr Bowman to use the telephone, because nobody had a phone either.

My dad got a car in about 1971. Before that he got to work on a bike, everybody had bikes, we all had bikes.

Oh, they were always in each others, everybody was always in our house, all the women. And as soon as my dad came home from work they used to go, always. Yes, all the women. Mrs Moore, Barbara Frost, my aunty Mary if she come over, a lady up the road called Joyce, they were all in our house. Dozens of kids everywhere. It's hard to believe we all got in that little room

Dad used to cycle home for lunch. He'd just have a sandwich, because we'd always have our dinner in the evening. All the women used to just go, and then they'd all just come back anyway during the afternoon.

I remember another thing. A family moved in down the road, I can't remember their name, and they had a small baby. And the next day me and this girl Deborah, we went and knocked on the door, and we said 'Can we take the baby for a walk', and she give us her baby!

Can you imagine it now!

'Bring it back at 12.00 for dinner' or something. OK. [We] got a clean nappy and a pair of rubbers, and you just pushed this baby about quite happily. It would never happen now. But then people let you do it, they trusted you to do it I suppose didn't they.

It was good times!

### **Entertainment**

'We always played in the road, you got up in the morning and you had breakfast and you just went out to play. You probably went back at lunch time, but there was no 'Where you going', nobody needed to know where you were 'cos you just went off to play.

We had massive long skipping ropes. If there was only two or three people you'd tie them on the down pipes. I had two elder brothers, we'd all play in the road, because Gt Eastern St was always a cul- de-sac. It would be Rounders, whatever, with everybody, could be cricket, depending on what was going or whoever had a bat of whatever sort.

And of course further down Mill Rd, right further down, was the Bowling Alley That was alright, that was a big thing to go in the bowling alley! Oh, it was dark, and a bit like a penny arcade at the sea-side. Oh, it was wonderful to go in there, we never went in there often.' [This became Robert Sayles carpet depot. 2008: pending planning application for Mosque].

## **TV**

'Dad tells me that one day my brother was really late home from school, and he came in eventually, and he was soaking wet, and he'd been on the Broadway, watching telly in Webbs window, and that's what made them get a telly. I suppose he'd have been about 11, so I suppose I was about 4 or 5.'  
[Webbs electrical shop on The Broadway]

## **School holidays**

'You'd go with friends, I mean you'd go all over the place, you'd go to Newnham, I learnt to swim in the river, the Rec, the Park, somebodies house, you'd build a den in somebodies garden, I don't think there was any set activities. My dad's Welsh, so every summer we used to go to Wales for holidays, always. No, I think you just made yourself happy.'

## **Punishment**

'Anything you did wrong, it was 'Oh, I'll tell your mum'. And you were so frightened of her. You see when we were little you were always afraid of somebody. If you were bad at school you got the cane because that is how it was.

We didn't have nothing, so you just had to make the best of what you got. You just made the best of whatever. But you certainly didn't go and break anything. You didn't pinch anything, short of Corona bottles, you wouldn't have gone and knocked anybodies walls down.

I seen a flasher once. On the park, on Coleridge Rd rec, with my friend. And I come home, and we was all giggly, and of course when we told my dad and my brothers, oh they went mad, and they all flew there, but he'd gone by then. But I don't think they'd have phoned the police, I think they'd have just given him a good hiding.'

## **Church**

'I always remember on a Sunday we'd go over the bridge to St Barnabas to church. Then we'd stay there to Sunday School, and she'd [mother] come home and put dinner on, and then you went back again at 6.00. It's hard to believe I went to church isn't it !

Always, it was something we always did, my mum was ever so religious. Always. No, my Dad wasn't, my dad didn't come.'

## **Romsey Town**

'You knew everybody, and everybody knew everybody, and I don't know why that is different now, probably because there's a lot more bedsits now, but everybody knew everybody.

Oh, it's changed a lot. Maybe it's a good way, I don't know, but everybody knew everybody's business, but I think people weren't working like they are now, and the women had time to stand and gossip, and spend hours along Mill Rd, didn't they. People are at work now, aren't they.

People wouldn't go back to it, would they? People just wouldn't want to would they.

I'm sure it was harder for people. They can say it was happier, but I'm sure it must have been much harder.'

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Alison's parents left Gt Eastern Street in 1986 to live in Yorkshire.

Alison McGannon interviewed by Allan Brigham July 2006 (edited version for CALH Review). The full transcript and other interviews will be deposited in  
The Cambridgeshire Collection.

Alison's childhood memories are amongst the personal stories captured in *'Bringing it all back home'* ( A. Brigham & C. Wiles)  
Available from 17. Romsey Road, Cambridge, CB1 3DD.  
£6 inc. postage.