

WITHINGTON VILLAGE

Withington from WWI to the 1950s and recollections of my family

'A dead un pulls a live un's legs' was certainly the case when I entered the world. My grandad was John William Russell (known as Jack) 1883 – 1942 and lived at 74, Henry Street, Withington. That was its name then, although when I was a youngster around seven years old, they changed its name to the more prestigious sounding Henwood Road. Jack had fought with the 5th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers in the 1st World War where he had been gassed in the trenches. This left him with a lifelong affliction that eventually was the cause of his death. He is buried at the back end of St Paul's graveyard, and the last time I visited, this area was roped off due to the ground being unsafe.

Jack was married to Elizabeth, nee Brown who was always known as Lizzie (1882 – 1961) and they married at St Paul's church before starting married life at 28, Cotton Hill. Prior to signing up, Jack had been a bricklayer's labourer.

Lizzie was the daughter of Henry, known as Harry, and his wife, Emma. They had four children, who all remained living in Withington throughout their lives. The children were Harry Brown, who in adulthood lived in Cooper Street (later renamed Copson Street), Charlie Brown and Lizzie Brown (my grandmother who, after marriage, was named Lizzie Russell), both lived in Henry Street (later renamed Henwood Road), and the youngest, Mary Brown, who, after marriage, became Mary Rothwell and lived in Ladybarn.

During Lizzie's childhood she lived on Cotton Lane in her father's general dealer / grocery shop which was at the corner of Cotton Hill opposite where the Cotton Tree Inn was later built, but now demolished. Their 'shop' is now shown on photos as a dwelling house but in those days, it was a shop and behind it, Harry had stables where he took his own life by hanging. I was always told this was due to poor management and debt. The shop itself was always referred to as Piggy Brown's.



The Cotton Tree Public House and the site of the shop (see arrow)



My father, Leonard William Russell, known as Len, was the eldest of two children, and he was born in Chorlton (1909 – 1982). He had a younger sister named Edna but she died aged three from chickenpox. During the 1920's and 1930's, Len's parents ran a fish and chip shop on Ladybarn Lane (see the photograph opposite). They made a good living out of this and bought their newly built home at 74, Henry Street.

On the right is a photograph of my mother, Dolly, and her brother, Frank, taken around 1918. Dolly was the illegitimate daughter of Emily Louisa Goodall of 60, Stanley Grove. Emily was only 16 years old, and there must be a story there. Dolly led a difficult and unhappy life. She took her own life at the age of 41 by gassing herself using the gas oven in 1953.



The above sets the seal for my own arrival, where my father, mother and sister lived at 5, Henry Street. In 1942, my paternal grandfather had died at No. 74 during the morning of 19th November and I entered the world in the afternoon. Due to the war, the maternity wing of St Mary's hospital had been relocated to Prestwich and my sister took great delight in teasing me that I had been born in what had been Prestwich Lunatic Asylum. Until the age of five, I think I had a happy childhood despite it being the war years. Mr & Mrs Starsmere lived at No. 3 and old Mrs Bunning lived No. 7. My friends, Brian Squires and Ann Sinclair, lived just up the row from us. One of my earliest recollections is of being scolded by my father for telling gossipy Mrs Williamson, who ran the corner shop on the corner of Cotton Lane and opposite our house, that we had coal under our floor boards. Of course, this was contraband coal stored there by my parents but I wasn't to know that. Another is of a young man being killed by a bomb as he drove his motorbike through the passage way leading from Parkville Road to Henry Street (Henwood Road). Another much larger bomb had fallen on housing between Henry Street and Cotton Hill leading to much of my childhood being spent playing on this bomb site. Later on, they built a block of flats on this land where the crater had been. The bombs had been aiming for Hans Renold's chain works at Burnage. Another bomb had fallen in St Paul's churchyard nearest to Wilmslow Road and left of the lynch gate. This bomb did not explode and was found sometime later. In 1940 a bomb also fell outside the Scala cinema but the film carried on. The Scala has since been demolished.

My father was exempt from war service as he suffered from epilepsy. Instead, he said he was an air raid warden and guarded the local pubs! He was a good pianist playing 'by ear' and not with music. V.E. Day (Victory in Europe Day) was the 8th May, 1945, and



neighbours pushed the piano from our house over to the Cotton Tree car park where my father played music whilst the neighbours danced. My father carried me home on his shoulders and it stuck in my memory because he hit my head on the upper lintel of our front door! There were street parties everywhere and I have a photo (see left) of Mummy, my sister and me attending one in Ladybarn Lane. I am the little blonde girl at the front of the photograph.

There was a tragic occurrence at the Cotton Tree Inn. Mr Price was the licensee and he had two children, Gerald and his younger sister, Janet. One day, the children were playing hide and seek in the upstairs accommodation and they found a gun under their parents' bed. Gerald went to put on the safety catch of the gun and accidentally fatally shot his little sister. As was usual then, the neighbours had a collection around Cotton Hill and Henry Street to help towards the funeral costs. Later Mrs Price wrote a book which I think she called, 'My daughter, Janet.'

Maybe it is as well that I haven't visited Withington in recent years and so my recollection of it is as it was when I was a child.

We lived at the beginning of Henry Street and my Nana lived at number 74. The houses at that end of the street were bigger and newer than ours at the other end. The outside lavatories there were actually joined onto the houses and not at the bottom of the yard like ours. Nana's house didn't have a bathroom but it did have 3 bedrooms. Later one of these was transformed into a bathroom. Behind the houses on this side of the road was a large piece of land that was used as allotments. Ours had fruit bushes and a vegetable patch on it with a chicken house at the bottom. Others had rows of rabbit hutches with some piled high on top of each other. Food was on ration and so rabbits and chickens were a good source of meat and eggs.

Henry Street ran off Cotton Lane leading into Kingslea Road, where the council houses were. My Aunty Lily Atherton lived at No. 26. At the back of these houses, there was a large field where cricket was played. We were not supposed to cut across the cricket field but we did because it provided a quick cut through to the bottom end of Henry Street.

At the back of our terraced house, No. 5, Henry Street, there was a passageway that led to the back entrance of Withington Laundry on Francis Road. From being a baby, my mother worked in the laundry and she used to take me with her until I was 18 months old, and old enough to go to nursery.

From 18 months to 3 years, I attended the day nursery at the far end of Heaton Road. This was a large Victorian house but I did not enjoy it because we were made to eat a spoonful of cod-liver oil every day, although the very sweet orange juice was always enjoyed.

Carrying on to the end of Heaton Road, it joined Wilmslow Rad. Turning right would lead you into Fallowfield where there was a large cycle track and when I was older, my sister took me to see Reg Harris and Beryl Burton winning many races there.

Turning left off Heaton Road led you into Withington Village.

A walk around Withington Village between 1942–52

The library was on the right hand side of the road. This was an imposing building with a distinctive 'library smell' of highly polished wood. On entering there, silence prevailed. I did venture in sometimes but I thought it was only for posh people and not for the likes of me.

After the library, the little shops were situated on both sides of the road with a toy shop, dressmakers and, best of all, a milk bar just before crossing Cooper Street (later known as Copson Street) where stood the Scala cinema and next to it a public house named the... was it the Red Lion, White Lion or Golden Lion? I can't remember because all three were in Withington.



I do remember the Scala cinema though and it was not unusual to queue up 2 or 3 times a week to enter by the side entrance on Cooper Street. Admission costs were cheaper there than on the front entrance. Inside it was a world of magic with red velvet seating. You could stay in the cinema as long as you liked and we often saw the films through twice before calling at the chip shop at the end of Arnfield Road and then munching our way along Cotton Lane with its high brick wall on the right behind which we were told never to enter because there were laboratories holding rats and dogs for experimentation. It was owned by Christie hospital. Half way along the wall was a little locked door and I used to rush past that because I was told if ever it opened, a ghost would come out.

But back to the village, and, after the library, on the left side of Wilmslow Road stood the Methodist church. From here, the Whit week walks around the village commenced and, on such occasions, the Anglicans and the Methodists joined together. The children were expected to wear white but I never managed a white dress and, on one occasion, my sister made me a blue monkey style bolero and skirt made from the bathroom curtains! With my flowers taken from our neighbours' gardens, I happily joined in the procession around the village. St Cuthbert's church was situated on Palatine Road and I can remember going to see Princess Margaret visiting there but I do not know what the occasion was. The Roman Catholics had their own procession and there was name-calling across the religions. They called us Protestants 'prody-dogs' and we called them 'cat-lickers.' I attended St. Paul's church and Sunday School, and it was there I was confirmed. I never attended the preparation classes for confirmation but I was pushed in because they had an odd number of children and I was put in to make up an even number so we could parade down the aisle in twos.

At St Paul's there was an amateur dramatics group who put on plays and pantomimes at Christmas in the school hall next door. At the age of three, I transferred from the day nursery to St Paul's school where I attended until I was five years of age and then transferred to Ladybarn primary school where, if we were good, the teacher let us stand on our chairs to watch 'the Flying Scotsman' train shoot past. From my home in Henry Street (Henwood Road), I had to walk the length of Stephens Road to school, and that could be a challenge. Half way along, the roads converged and were known as Five Ways. This was the days of the notorious smog – a mixture of fog and smoke. You literally could not see a hand's length in front of you and on reaching Five Ways, it was very easy to lose your bearings and go along the wrong road.

Back to Withington Village: After St Paul's church and school there was an archway where Mr Pridy had his blacksmith shop. We used to go in there to watch him putting shoes on horses. He wore a long leather apron and hammered the horses shoes out over an open fire on the anvil. He would then pick up the horse's leg and hammer the shoe on to its foot amidst billowing smoke and steam.

Next along the road came the Fire Station where the firemen lived on the premises (or so I believed). Sometimes we could watch them practicing their drill before taking out the red fire engine with its bell clanging.

I almost forgot another important building and, to get to that, you had to cross the road and pass St. Cuthbert's church, cross Palatine Road and walk up a passageway to Withington baths. I loved going there and that is where I learnt to swim at the age of five. I can't remember anyone teaching me, I just used to go along with a group of older children and we played and swam in the ice-cold water followed by a steaming mug of Bovril. The baths were tiled and the cubicles ran around the baths with boys on one side and girls on the other. Each cubicle had a half door with a half curtain at the top. Naughty boys used to stand on the wooden seat in one of the girls' cubicles and peer over to see a girl changing on the other side. It cost 6d to go for a swim and 1d for Bovril (together about 3p in today's money).

Lastly, I want to tell you about when the American soldiers arrived in Withington causing great excitement. They were billeted on what later became a small-holding at the end of Parkville Road leading onto Wilmslow Road. My earliest childhood memories are of them marching along Parkville Road and cutting through the passageway to Henry Street. Neighbours came out of their houses to cheer and clap them along whilst children shouted, "Have you any gum, chum," and the soldiers gave them sweets and chocolate. From a very early age, a soldier would take me from my mother's arms and I would sit on each one's shoulders as they passed me along the platoon. I became their mascot, so to speak. Women found them very attractive and I can remember my grandma remarking with a sour expression that so-and-so was wearing nylon stockings given to her by a 'Yank'. My mother never had such a gift and she used to paint lines up the back of her legs to look like stockings.

I do hope you have enjoyed joining me on this journey into my childhood life in Withington. I have lived in Chesterfield since I married at St Paul's church at the tender age of 17 years, but that is another story.

Joan Rowland nee: Dorothy Joan Russell

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