

MAGNETIC BITTERNE

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“Yes” I say to clients, “I can give you directions to Bitterne.”, after all, not only do I work there, at Eric Robinson Solicitors on Bitterne Road, I also grew up in the area, off and on. I think of myself as a local girl, despite having moved away periodically.



For some reason I always return after a few years as if drawn by an invisible force that pulls me back to the eastern side of the city. It seems like I can only go so far before I come flying home.

As a child I lived locally or abroad. As an adult I have lived in Sholing, Highfield, Freemantle, Sholing again and now, finally, I live just outside Bitterne. Running through all the years, from childhood to adulthood, the tie to Bitterne remained. I worshipped there, played there, shopped there or visited friends and family living in Bitterne before finally finding myself working there.

During my childhood ‘home’ was either staying with Dad’s parents in Ruby Road or with Mum’s parents in Spring Road. All the other houses we stayed in were temporary lettings, sometimes for a few months and sometimes a couple of years.

Although I was born in Southampton, my father’s job in the Army meant we moved around as we followed him to various postings. In those days soldiers were allowed to take their families with them, although not all wives were willing to uproot themselves and move their children to live in some far away foreign land. My mother had no such qualms and embraced each new experience as an adventure to be enjoyed.

Over the years I lived in Germany and Cyprus before Dad had to make a decision about his future. If he had stayed in the army the next move might have been to Hong Kong or Singapore but he decided that, after his final posting, he would leave and enter the Civil Service. When that happened we moved permanently back to Southampton and lived in Spring Road.

I can clearly remember one of our trips back home after we returned from Germany. Dad had gone on ahead to Cyprus and, while we waited to follow him, we stayed with Grandpa and Grandma in Ruby Road. I was about four at the time and my younger brothers about 15 months and 3 months old. Strollers and Buggies had yet to be invented so Mum had a large pram which she pushed when she took us visiting family.

All the family lived in or around Bitterne, with old Granny in White's Road, my Aunty Mary and Uncle Alan in Carisbrooke Drive, Aunty Betty in Edwina Close and Uncle George and Aunty Lily at the top of Ruby Road. There was, therefore, a lot of family visiting to be done in the few months before we had to leave again.



Traffic was very heavy as it passed down the Bursledon Road towards the Red Lion. I remember I always had to walk on the inside of the pram between Mum and the wall of Bitterne C of E Church. One day we were passing when a burial was taking place in the churchyard.

I asked Mum what was happening and she did her best to explain death to me. She said that the person who was being buried had died and wasn't coming back again. However, he was very happy because his spirit was going to God in Heaven so it wasn't a sad occasion at all except that all his family and friends would miss him.

I asked for an explanation of the spirit so Mum explained that it was something inside the body that we couldn't see, that it was very light, not like the body which is heavy and that when everyone had gone away the light part would rise up and go to heaven leaving the body in the ground.

Little did she know that in my vocabulary the body was simply the trunk, the arms and legs being additions to the body. I was not sure about the head, whether that was something separate or part of the body. I therefore got the idea that at night arms, legs and possibly a head might be seen floating up to the sky encased in the spirit which resembled a large, loose transparent silvery bag, whilst the heavy trunk remained underground in its grave. Because the subject never came up again, it was many years before it dawned on me that this wasn't quite what she meant and that I was in no danger of encountering this startling sight however late and dark it might get in the churchyard.

During the few months we were home between postings I would go to either the infants or junior school for a term or so before leaving again to follow Dad. It must have seemed strange to the other children, me coming and going like that over the years, but to me it was perfectly normal. I don't know why I went to Sholing School instead of Bitterne School but perhaps it was due to available spaces.

Grandpa grew up living in White's Road. My Grandma lived at Shrub Cottage in what was then Lodge Road, now called Ruby Road. They only lived two roads apart. Grandma's name was Louise but she had been called Cis or Cissy from childhood, a nickname formed from her brothers calling her Sis (for sister). That nickname stuck and I never heard anyone call her anything other than Mrs Shergold or Cis or, of course, Grandma. Her mother had died when she was aged twelve and still at school. Her father immediately took her out of school so that she could run the house and care for him and her three brothers.

While my twelve-year-old Grandma cleaned and polished, washed clothes and bedding by hand, ironed and cooked, her father went out with the horse and cart taking to market the strawberries he farmed on the surrounding fields. To get to town he had to drive his horse and cart down Lances Hill and stop at the bottom to pay the toll to cross the river at Northam. The toll booth looked like a wooden sentry box, illuminated by the street light next to it.



The strawberry fields are long gone now as they were gradually sold off during the early 1900s and the land built upon.

My Grandmother was born in Shrub Cottage and continued to live there after she married Grandpa. He had courted her before he went away to France and when he came home, after the war, he bought the house from her father and married her. This meant in effect that she lived in the same home from the moment she came into this world, through her childhood, marriage and the raising of children, until she was in her eighties. She would never have lived anywhere else had not Grandpa lost his sight, requiring a move into a warden controlled flat.

I remember the excitement she had choosing new furnishings for the flat and my slow realisation of what she had missed out on in life when a young woman. She was showing all the enthusiasm for a move away from home that I too was experiencing, having recently married in the new Methodist Church in White's Road then moved to Highfield. She was like a young girl choosing her new furniture. She got rid of all the old furniture that required polishing with beeswax and replaced her cherry wood table and chairs with the latest design in melamine. Out went the old oak wardrobes and in came flat packs. She merrily gave to her grandchildren the priceless antiques that to her were just old, inherited and not of her choosing, so that she could have light, modern pieces that she had chosen herself. In fact, she chose very well because in the years after she passed away the flat pack wardrobes and chests of drawers were used by me as my own children grew up, by my youngest son when he set up home and they only recently finally collapsed, beyond repair, after being used by my grandchildren. Grandma would be very pleased if she could see the use that her family had made of her new furniture.

When I was young and they still lived in Ruby Road, Grandma and Grandpa were keen for me to join the Methodist Sunday School. This was part of the old Methodist Church building that used to be on the corner of Pound Street and Bitterne Road, before the by-pass was built. Lloyds Bank stands there now in the Bitterne Precinct. I stayed in church for the first part of the service and then left with the other children to go into another part of the building for Sunday School before the sermon started. Those sermons must have been very long because while we were away we had time for a scripture story followed by drawing and colouring a picture to represent the story. After that we trooped back into church and I would join Grandma for the final hymn. Grandpa wasn't sitting with us, of course, because he was singing in the choir. I remember sitting on those hard wooden pews with my legs dangling, gazing at the Reverend Yates and wondering what mysteries had taken place whilst I had been absent. I thought that it must be something unspeakably adult, quite unsuitable for children, which was why we had to leave.

When the old church was demolished Mum and Dad bought one of the pews and used it as a garden seat. It was a great deal more comfortable then, when my feet could touch the ground and I could put a cushion at my back.

Once I was old enough to decide that I didn't really want to go to church no pressure was put upon me to attend. I did, however, still attend the church services for occasions like St George's Day as part of the Scout and Guide parades. I remember we met at the Scout and Guide hut in Pound Street up the road running alongside the old Methodist church. I seem to remember there was a playing field there as well where we chased each other about letting off steam before forming up into a line to march down to Church with banners waving.



My two younger brothers joined the cubs and scouts. We felt very smart in our uniforms and had this picture taken in the garden. In the front row is Stephen, Peter then me and behind us our mother Joan Shergold and her parents Fred and Beatrice Miller.

Peter, who now runs his own hairdressing salon in Hedge End, told me that he first learned the rules of market economy through going on a scout camp. Apparently, on the first day of the camp one of the boys bought a sheath knife which was strictly not permitted. Only penknives could be carried. He showed it in secret to the other Scouts who all wanted to own it. Now the sheath knife had cost a lot of money. The scout quickly realised that he only had two weeks to enjoy it before he went home because his parents were bound to discover and confiscate it. So, he decided to sell it on for rather less money than he paid. The next Scout came to the same realisation after a day or so and quickly sold it on to another, again at a slight loss. Over the two week camp every boy had owned the knife for about a day, the last boy having bought it for so little he wasn't worried if his parents

wouldn't allow him to keep it for, at least, he had been able to hold and possess it. Peter says it was an invaluable business lesson that has stood him in good stead over the years.

Despite no longer attending church regularly, in the Reverend Yates' eyes I was still one of his flock, albeit a little lamb that was in danger of getting lost. He swooped down to save me one evening when I was about fifteen years old. Billy Graham had come to England to evangelise and some girls at school had heard he would be appearing at the Guildhall. They decided they wanted to go along and see what all the fuss was about so I asked Mum and Dad if I could go too. They agreed, once companions had been vetted, bus routes and timetables had been consulted and the latest time home agreed.

So it was that four of us caught the bus from Bitterne down to town. It was the first time I had been allowed out in the evening and I suppose it was my first, very innocent, experience of a girls' night out. We were full of excitement, expecting to see something miraculous, although we were not sure what, but at least something very unusual.

What a disappointment that evening was. Firstly, Billy Graham wasn't present. Instead it was a televised link from somewhere in London. We duly sat and listened to the preaching then watched while converts rose from their seats to be born-again Christians. They went up the steps to the Guildhall stage then went behind the curtains for..... what? In my fevered imagination some sort of wild transformation was taking place and I wanted to go and have a look. So did my friends so up we went. With mounting nerves I went behind the long dark curtains, only to find some elderly people sat behind desks ready to take down my name, address and telephone number with a promise that Billy would be in touch soon.

On the bus home, comparing notes, I was shocked to hear that my friends had all given false names and addresses as I couldn't see any reason to do that. Oh, if only I had done that too what an embarrassing consequence I would have been spared.

When I got home, I told Mum and Dad how disappointing the evening had been then went to bed. The next day I went to school as usual but when I came home Mum opened the door with a face like thunder. She said we had a visitor and indicated I should go into the front room, which we only used for special occasions. I went in to find the Reverend Yates sitting on our best (and only) sofa with the best teapot and china laid out on a tray with a plate of biscuits. The Reverend Yates had come visiting. The chill in the room was not only due to the lack of heating, the fire laid out in the open grate being unlit. I carefully smoothed my grey school skirt over my knees and sat down to face the music.

With deep sorrow the Reverend Yates asked me why I had allowed myself to be poached by another organisation. Those weren't his exact words. I was too overawed by the visit to remember exactly what he said but I do remember we were a family in deep disgrace. I apologised for the embarrassment I must have caused, especially to Grandpa and Grandma, and promised to renounce being a born-again Christian and go back to being a (pretty much) lapsed Methodist.

It was through Grandpa that I got my first holiday job. After he retired from working as a foreman in the docks he looked around for part-time work to top up his pension and took

on the unlikely position of a salesman in a gentleman's outfitters. Frank Cross Gentleman's Outfitters were on the main Bitterne Road, roughly where Santander and the 99p shop now stand. I think Grandpa was an immediate success because he was the same age as the customers and could talk knowledgably about cavalry twill trousers and the merits or otherwise of turn-ups, the benefits of long interlocking underwear and the right sort of tie to wear for a special occasion. I have no idea why he thought I might be suitable to be put forward as a temporary junior sales assistant but he did.

My mother then informed me, after I had taken my last GCE on a Friday, that on Monday I would start work at Mr Cross' other shop in Portswood and would earn £4/10 (four pounds ten shillings in pre-decimalisation money) per week for working six days a week including Saturday but with a half day on Wednesday afternoon. This was to continue until my first term at Itchen College started in September.

My only experience of work at that time had been as a Saturday girl in Woolworths, firstly on the Haberdashery counter then later on the Groceries counter. For that I earned 17/6d a day (seventeen shillings and six pence, again in old money). On Haberdashery I kept being asked questions far beyond my knowledge, like how much knicker elastic might be needed for four pairs of gym shorts. The Supervisor asked me what GCEs I was taking and when I mentioned Maths I was immediately put onto Groceries because it was assumed I could add up in my head. I would look at the items in the basket, add it all up and announce a total, probably with a faint air of pleading in the hope the customer would agree with me. Usually the customer did so I rang up the total amount, took the money and counted back the change. People of my age and older will remember counting back change, but I know from experience that asking anyone in a shop to do it today is to be met with a blank look.

Selling groceries in Woolworths was a doddle compared with selling men's clothing in Frank Cross. I was absolutely hopeless as a junior sales assistant which was quickly picked up by the mature sales ladies there who were very kind to me. They suggested to Mr Cross that, instead of working on the shop floor, I work in the office with the book-keeper, who would train me in accounts. Unfortunately, I have never had a head for figures, despite being able to count in my head and double-entry book keeping remains a mystery to me. After eight long weeks it was with some relief that I went back to education and started A levels at Itchen College.

After lessons and sometimes at weekends I would walk up to the new Bitterne Library to change my books. Before it was built I used to go to the Library at Cobbett Road on a Saturday in the car with Dad. When the new library was built I was able to walk there on my own which meant I could read and change a lot more books. When the by-pass was built in the late 1970s/early 1980s it cut Bitterne in half, leaving the library on one side and what is now Bitterne Village on the other. Many buildings were demolished to make way for the construction of it. It seemed like a monster, gobbling up all in its path, leaving a scar on land.

On my way to the library I would sometimes call in on my friend Deanna Watts. She lived in a flat over some shops beside the old Methodist Church. The entrance was reached down an alleyway then up a flight of steps to a landing that ran along the back of the flats. She lived

in the first flat at the top of the stairs with her parents, her younger sister and her grandmother.

I remember what a very friendly and welcoming family they were, always opening the door to me with a smile and an instruction to go and sit down while a cup of tea was made. While Deanna was getting ready I would sit at the table in their kitchen and chat to Mrs Watts and her mother, all the time trying to pretend I hadn't noticed Deanna's little sister hiding under the table because she was very shy.

When Deanna left school she went to work at the Civic Centre. I only stayed one term at Itchen College then left after a visiting career's adviser had given a talk about the Civil Service. I decided my future lay in the Inland Revenue and started work as a trainee Tax Officer in the High Street. Deanna and I would catch the same bus into town from Bitterne and then meet up for the journey home. During our bus journeys we would sit on the top deck and smoke cigarettes while we exchanged news and discussed our hopes and plans for the future. I didn't really like smoking but I wanted to look grown up so I used to smoke menthol cigarettes as they were the least horrible. We lost touch after a few years. I wonder where she is now?

It was while I was working at the Tax Office that I moved to Portswood briefly, then Highfield. It was still easy getting to work on the bus but I decided that, despite the promise of a really good pension in forty-two years' time, a life in taxes really wasn't for me so I left to become a secretarial temp. I typed my way all over the city for years as a temp and was never short of work.

I remember working through the period known as the 'three-day week'. Funnily enough, that is what I work now but this time, by choice, part time. Back then around 1973-4 it was due to the miners' strike and lack of power for electricity. Candles weren't really practical due to the fire hazards of working with lots of paper files but we did our best.

One night I was due to go back to my parents' house for dinner but the buses weren't running for some reason so I had to walk from the town centre. I couldn't believe that my mother regularly did the same walk when she was my age, during the war. The killer was Lances Hill. However, did she walk up that in her evening shoes after a Saturday night out dancing at the Guildhall? She says it was different during the war and that people accepted that, if you wanted to go anywhere, you walked.

The only alternative for me that evening would have been to cross the River Itchen further down at Woolston. However, I didn't want to risk getting there and finding the floating bridge was also not running that night. That would have been a longer but easier route. In fact, years later when I had returned once more to live on the eastern side of the city, I regularly walked to work on the Town Quay, via Woolston. However, by that time the chain-ferry floating bridge had been replaced by the Itchen Toll Bridge. When the toll bridge was built the residents were informed that tolls were to be charged until enough money had been raised to repay the cost of building it. To no-one's surprise but everyone's disgust many years have passed since the loan for building that bridge was paid off but the City Council continues to charge for crossing it.

Eventually I moved from Highfield to Freemantle for a few years before moving back to the east side of town to a house in Middle Road, opposite Itchen College. Strangely enough, the house was built on land that my Great-Grandfather had farmed. Even more strangely, the house was previously the Methodist Manse in which had lived the Reverend Yates. Despite the telling-off I had from him many years previously, I had no hesitation moving in as the house had a lovely, warm family atmosphere. After we moved in my brother visited and said he remembered playing in the garden with David Yates, the Minister's son. It was a lovely house with high ceilings, a large hallway and good-sized rooms including an office on the ground floor which the Reverend Yates used for composing his sermons and general pastoral work.

The house stood on high ground so that on a clear night we could hear the Civic Centre clock chiming. On New Year's Eve, at midnight, we could hear the sound of the ships' hooters exchanging greetings. It had some quirky restrictions attached which we found out about just before the contract was signed, including a restriction against music and dancing after 8 pm on Sundays and a total restriction against drinking alcohol within its walls. Despite these prohibitions the purchase went ahead and I lived there very happily until the children had grown up and left home. We simply drew the curtains if any infringement was intended.

Once the children had gone, however, the house felt big and empty and so there was yet another move, this time to something smaller. The new house, a bungalow, was only ten minutes' drive from Bitterne. I had been looking around for a permanent job for some time so when I saw exactly what I wanted advertised, at Eric Robinsons' offices in Bitterne, I immediately applied. It was a very good decision on my part as it led to my current position within the Child Care Department, which I enjoy tremendously.

As part of my job I meet a great many interesting people and attend with them at legal planning meetings. When I go to work I usually park behind the office in the public car park on Lances Hill. When I return to my car, if the sun is shining, I sometimes pause to look across the valley towards the City centre. The nature of my job means I have to drive to different areas of the town to attend meetings. A lot of these meetings are in the very centre of the town at the Civic Centre, others are in the suburbs or further out in the countryside.

The office in which I work sits on the top of the steep eastern wall of the valley, facing east towards Bitterne Precinct.



The land behind it falls away down Lances Hill, with views across the city to the port. Driving down the hill towards the city centre I cross Northam Bridge, spanning the River Itchen. These days no toll is due.

On a clear day it is easy to see some of the cruise liners that have come in for an overnight stay and a change-over of passengers. These liners are the source of casual employment for many of my retired friends, who like to spend one or two days a week meeting and greeting passengers, checking them in or parking their cars.

As I drive over the Northam Bridge I see the ugliness of Southampton, the mountain of scrap metal and the derelict boats that line its banks. When the tide is out the large flat mud banks littered with flotsam and jetsam are exposed. But if I turn my head and look further up or down the river I can see all the little yachts with their white masts bobbing about at their moorings.

If I have a meeting at Hythe or Lymington, I drive through the city towards the New Forest in the west. I head for the Redbridge flyover that crosses the Test where it opens out into the head of Southampton Water, driving past lines of impossibly tall cranes, loading and unloading containers and row upon row of new cars. Lorries are busy entering and leaving the dock gate, loaded up with containers destined for other parts of the country. I think to myself, "My Grandpa worked there but he wouldn't recognise the place if he could see it now".

I have been criss-crossing this town for years without noticing what a lovely place it is. It took a television documentary called Sea City to open my eyes to its beauty. I saw my town through the eyes of a visitor, recognising everything but seeing it as if for the first time.

If I am not working away from the office, I walk down through the pedestrian precinct during my lunch hour. I sometimes feel the ghosts of Bitterne past walking alongside me or peering out behind the back of a building. I walked those pavements in my school uniform, my guide uniform, my work clothes and my Saturday night out best, giggling with my friends. The buildings I went into are now long gone but I still see them, in my mind's eye, every time I pass the places where they stood.



I cannot walk from the Angel Crescent car park, past Lloyds Bank and into its neighbour Premier shop without remembering the Old Methodist Church. If I walk from the car park

down the alleyway alongside the now empty Thomas Cook, I remember visiting my friend Deanna who lived in the flats nearby. As I cross the road from my office and walk past the estate agents on the corner, I remember the fruit and veg shop where the women hawked their wares, all the weights in pounds and ounces and the prices in shillings and pence.

A ghost from as recently as fifty years ago wouldn't recognise the place now. The whole character of Bitterne was changed when the by-pass was built. Whole streets of houses were bought up to be demolished for the construction of the dual carriage way that sweeps past the Precinct and rejoins Bitterne Road part way down Lances Hill.

Although there is an underpass connecting the two parts of Bitterne, there is a sense of separation caused by that unlovely scar on the land.

Bitterne was always a busy, bustling place and that, at least, has not changed.



It is particularly busy on a Wednesday when the market stalls line up down the centre of the Precinct. This is a relatively new feature in Bitterne but a very successful one, as it draws in people who then visit the local shops as well.

They call it Bitterne Village now and the name feels right. It has everything a community needs from God to Mammon. It has the Church of England with its neighbours, the new Methodist Church in Whites Road, the United Reformed Church over the top of Iceland and the Roman Catholic Church on the other side of the by-pass at one end and the Spiritualist Church on Lances Hill at the other. They all serve the spiritual needs of the community. The Red Lion and the various cafes, greengrocers, butchers and bakers serve the more bodily needs. Commerce is served by the variety of banks and a building society and health needs are met by the local medical centres and various pharmacies and opticians. We can buy everything from food, drink, clothes, shoes, bags, jewellery, locks, keys, cards and travel accessories, to musical instruments, entertainment systems, soft furnishings and houses, the area being well served with estate agents. If there is an accident or someone is taken ill in Bitterne they are blessed by having a Rapid Response Vehicle waiting nearby in the car park on Lances Hill, ready at the call of 999 to switch on its blue lights and come to the rescue. Visitors to Bitterne can park in any of the many car parks all of which have a minimum of two hours free parking, some up to five hours.

It also has a sense of community, particularly in the village itself. I notice the same faces sitting around the tables outside the Coffee and Baguette shop, whatever the weather, chatting to each other as they drink their coffee or eat a snack.



One day, as I was walking back to the office after lunch at The Red Lion, I overheard one of the customers, a smartly dressed lady of uncertain age, speaking to a man who was just getting up. “Yes” she said, “You will usually find us here most days, so do come along if you want some company.”

Other souls are not so hardy. The benches down the centre of the Precinct are empty on wet days, but when the sun shines groups of young Mums meet up with their buggies to sit and chat while they watch their pre-school children running around.

One day I will decide to stop working altogether. When that day comes I will miss my lunch time walks into the Precinct. It’s not unusual for me to hear a voice call out my name and, turning, see a former client who wants to stop for a chat. I have bumped into friends and sat on the benches in the sunshine to catch up on the news. I will still be attached to Bitterne even if that attachment is looser in the future for I shall still return from time to time as a visitor.