

MEMORIES OF 76 BITTERNE ROAD

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76 Bitterne Road was the home of my Grandparents, George and Isobel Laverty, whom I called Gaga and Nana.

The house was long and narrow. Inside the front door on the left was a large and comfortable sitting-room with brown leather arm chairs and a wicker table at the side of the chair my Nana used. It supported a ceramic bowl containing received Christmas cards which we children were permitted to look at. There was an ancient aspidistra plant in a large green pot on a small table in the bay window.

The next room along the passage was known as 'the middle room' and contained a large polished dining table that could be extended to the full length of the room with an extra leaf inserted. This room had a sash window in the corner looking out to the back yard, a very small garden area with a double washing line on a pulley and a small bicycle shed.

There was a door out into the back area further down the passage before going into the last room, a warm and cosy kitchen. This was the room I remember best. It contained another large table, seating about six. It was here that ironing would be done on a blanket and sheet with flat irons heated on the kitchen range and the finished clothing placed on an airing rack pulled up against the ceiling; hand work could be undertaken by one of the girls or a book studied, all under the light of a gas mantle overhead.

There was a shelf on the wall above the range with large, flat black and white ceramic dogs, one at each end and a clock in the middle. A canary lived in a cage and sang its heart out in the corner near the window in the daytime and was covered with a green cloth at night.

Against the wall was a large welsh dresser with cupboards under the drawers. Within the cupboards were kept shoes of all sizes and shapes, large men's shoes suitable for the garden, lady's indoor slippers and shoes and some gold and silver dancing shoes. I can remember taking my first steps from this cup-board to the nearest chair. Later my cousin and I as the two youngest grand-children were permitted to rummage in the shoe cupboard and try on the dancing shoes with crushed newspaper in the toes.

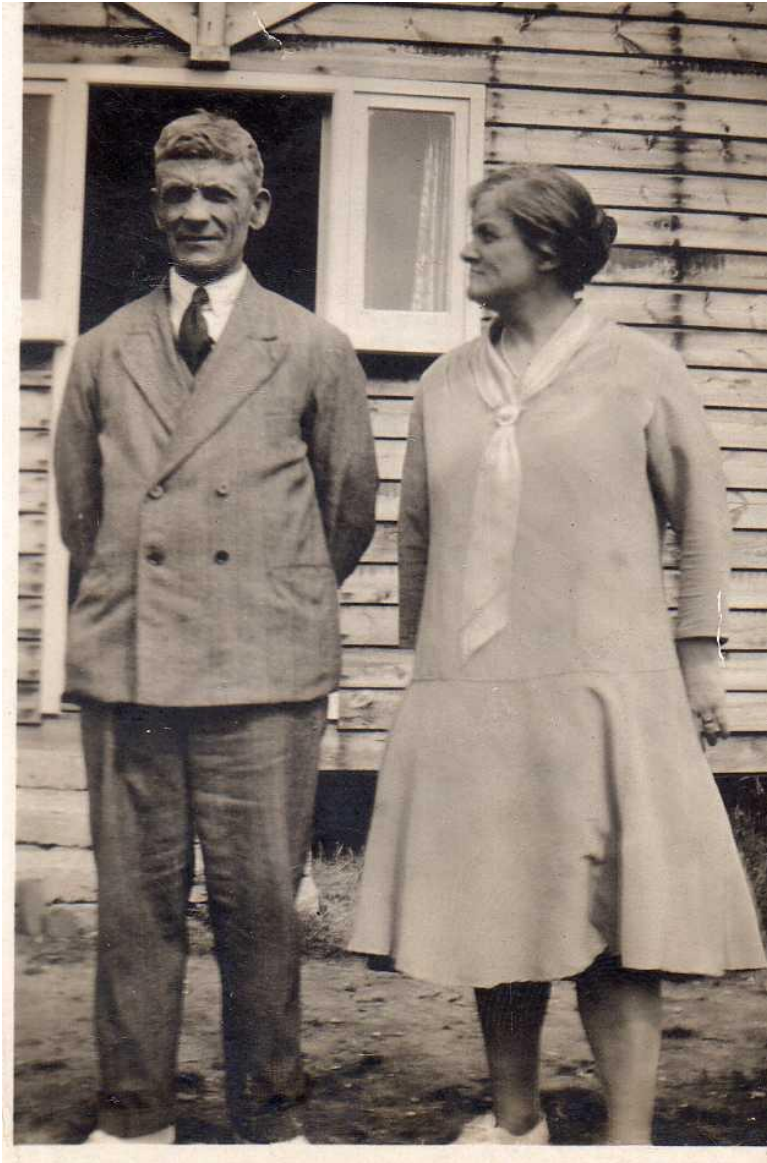
Beyond the kitchen was a scullery with another table where food was prepared and dishes collected to be washed, dried and kept in cupboards against the wall.

The arrangement of the house upstairs was the same, with a large master bed-room at the front, and a blue 'middle bedroom' where Nana slept in a large double bed. Next was a bathroom down the long passage in the middle of the house at the top of the stairs. This was very modern, not many houses had an upstairs bathroom at that time. There were other bedrooms in the back of the house that I was not permitted to inspect.

I know about Nana's room because I sometimes shared the bed with her if I was being parked overnight. She would stand in front of the dressing table mirror and brush her long, greying hair and put it into two plaits before getting into bed. I asked her one night "Why

don't you have your hair cut off too Nana?" She replied "No, No Joan, that's for the young people! There is a time for everyone, just like it's time for you now to be a little girl!" I remember Nana as someone in whom I could confide some special thoughts without being laughed at or provoking the usual response "My Goodness, she's an odd child - where does she get it from!"

Nana and Gaga had seven children all told and eight grandchildren of which I was the



youngest. My memories are naturally hazy as my early recollections about the house go back about eighty years. However, I was told stories by my mother and three Aunts, four sisters out of the seven children.

Bella was the eldest and tallest, Sis next in line, Beat, my mother, and Maggie, known by her own description as 'the pretty one.'

The three brothers were Will, who went to sea and made exciting returns from South Africa with boxes of exotic fruit - pineapples and custard apples not imported into the country. Bert who was apprenticed into work in the dockyard and George the youngest child, born late into the family and only ten years older than the eldest grandchild. He was badly afflicted by his eyesight.

Aunty Mag was always a source of fond amusement to me and irritation to her three sisters.

They say 'it takes one to know one' and I think I always recognised Aunty Mag as a kindred spirit - a bit odd too like me!

As related by my mother, "Our Mag was the last to get married! The fashion at the time was to have the skirt length above the knee. That's what she wanted, but as I was making her dress she could not have it that way. I told her "below the knee or I won't make it!"

My mother made all the wedding dresses for her sisters; she was a highly skilled dressmaker once told by her father when she started her apprenticeship "if that is what you choose to do, then you must do it properly and learn to cut own patterns - after all what have you got

- a hole for the neck and two holes for the arms, a waist that can be set anywhere and a skirt length according to fashion!" What amazingly sound and simple advice for a father to give. My mother adhered to it all her life.

The four girls were married in Bitterne Church at the top of Lances Hill and the skirt lengths changed each time.



1918

Bella and Len



1920

Sis and Jim



1922 My parents

Beatrice (Beat) and Fred



1927
Maggie and
Cecil

It was after WW1, when young women went out to work and emancipation set in; hair was cut off and waists went up and down, although looking at photographs, not too much in and out.

Apart from the confrontation with Aunty Mag about the length of her skirt, my mother did not make a lot of comment except to say "Our Mag! She was a little madam! On the day of the Wedding everybody went off in turn to the Church in the cars hired for the day and I of course dressed the Bride in the big front bedroom. She did look rather nice. Then it was time to go, so I quickly took a trip down the passage to the bathroom. When I came out our Mag and our Dad were gone! No thought for me at all! I had to walk and catch a bus up Lances Hill to the Church!" Trying not to laugh, I made suitable clucking noises of sympathy for what I could see was still a sore subject.

From conversations much later with my Aunts, there seemed to be a fair amount of sisterly friction between all the girls. Aunt Bella told me "Our Sis could do beautiful crochet, she made collars for our dresses and pillow trims for the 'bottom drawers', I could do it a bit but not like our Sis. Of course, your Mother never could you know and said it wasn't very special, although Aunty Sis told me one day, "Your Mum was the clever one with her hands, she had a trade and our Dad made sure she had a proper treadle sewing machine in the middle room. She used that room all the time, it was her workroom. Our Bella served in a shop all day. Me? Oh, I helped our Mum, there was a lot to do in the house. The boys were out and needed feeding when they came in."

The family weddings at Bitterne Church were customarily followed by simple receptions for family and a few friends. The photographs show a small group taken in the front garden or arranged along the front of the house that was more suitable for such a group photo than the back yard and bicycle shed.

I especially remember the house at Christmas when the married girls would return to the family home with their own children. It was a time of parties, hide and seek through the building, in cupboards and behind doors but not in the bedrooms; blind man's buff; charades and a sing-song led by Uncle Jim.

As a family we were close knit. The three generations all went to Highcliffe on holiday together in July or August. The attached photograph was taken with Gaga surrounded by all his Grandchildren.

I remember there was a lot of noise and jostling as to who would sit closest to Gaga. I was dumped on the ground in front, felt a hand on my back and I suddenly realised that this man was my Gaga too. I turned and looked up at him. He caught my eye and smiling said "Hello! Have you come to join us at last?" just as the camera clicked.

I have this one beloved photo-graph taken with Gaga, but Nana whom I remember so well, died in 1935 when I was seven years old.

Both Gaga and Nana are buried in Bitterne Church. I realise this Church is a strongly cemented foundation of my life although sadly I have not visited for many years, due to no longer living within easy travelling distance.

