

My New Forest Story

I, Pamela Margaret Clapp, nee Wollaston, was born in the middle of the New Forest in the Fenwick Cottage Hospital, on the Cadnam Road, Lyndhurst, on St George's Day 23 April 1944. It was just prior to D-Day and the whole forest was alive with billeted troops ready for the invasion of Europe, but in the hospital where I was born, all was safe and quiet.

After a short while I was taken home to 'The Nest', a Forester's little semi-detached cottage in the hamlet of Gritnam, deep in the heart of the forest, and where I would live and spend the first eleven and formable years of my life. My father was a forester for the Forestry Commission and the cottage came with his employment. The household consisted of my Mother and Father, my older brother William (Bill), younger sister Jenny and myself.

Gritnam is a couple of miles south of Lyndhurst and is reached off the main Christchurch road through the village of Bank. Passing to the side of the Royal Oak public house at Bank, you journeyed down a narrow metallic road, passing the large well spaced houses of the gentry, until you reached a gravel track. Continuing down this track, over the stream bridge you came to the hamlet of Gritnam, about half a dozen properties, forming the square, all the buildings facing outward, as they still do today, with their rear gardens forming a cultivated area in the centre. Around the perimeter was the gravel road, then an area of grass with a stream running through it, all encircled by the safety of the forest. It was here in this tranquil spot that I was fortunate enough to have spent my early childhood.

Our cottage was a typical semi-detached two storey New Forest cottage and joined the Purse's cottage. It was snug and warm, although being quite basic. Apart from the three upstairs and two main downstairs rooms, I remember a door also went from the sitting room out the back into what was originally a scullery, but mother used it as a kitchen where she did the cooking and washing. Mother would draw pure clear water from a well outside or use the 'Mod Con' cold water tap that had been installed in the scullery. In the corner was a large built-in copper with a fire place underneath used for boiling the water for our baths and for boiling the 'whites' in on wash day. Mother used to wash all our other clothes by hand in the sink, where there was just the cold water tap. Mother always did her washing on a Monday morning, that was wash day, no work was ever done on a Sunday. One evening a week, when the men were out, Mother would boil up some water and put in the long tin bath for our bath night. This was always a special event for my sister and I.

Other hot water was attained by heating kettles of water on the black lead grate in the kitchen. The cottage had no electricity, so we had oil lamps to see by after dark and an accumulator to run the radio set. We had to take the accumulator to the electric shop in Lyndhurst to get it charged up when it went 'flat'. However, finally, mother did have a new 'Calor' gas stove to cook and heat water upon, bought by father at the first New Forest Show.

From the scullery the back door led into a small yard which housed the outside WC, a small brick building which contained inside a wooden seat built over a bucket. On the outside wall of the WC was the place the metal bath was hung and around the side of the yard was the side gate leading out onto the path and into the forest. Up a few steps from the end of the yard took you to father's garden. Father worked on this large garden at the rear of the cottage every free moment and it always seemed to be full of vegetables and fruit. Beyond the garden we had a pig and some chickens and at the very bottom of our plot bee hives for honey. I can see Father now with his

clothes on, hat with net, gloves and using his smoke gun to make the bees drowsy. I used to love watching him take out the honey cones from the hives and to help him separate the honey in the separating machine, the handle of which I would turn like fury. He stored his honey in jars on shelves, some runny, some hard.

It was a beautiful place to live and from the front door you could walk straight out into the forest. In front of the cottage was an area of grass with a small stream running through it and then all was surrounded by the trees of the forest. New Forest ponies, together with cows and donkeys would stroll right up to the front door of the cottages. Going south was a narrow dirt track which took you down to the river, with its timber bridge over, and then the path lead you on towards the Ornamental Drive.

Each morning, with my brother and sister, I would watch father, with his leather army body warmer on and his army first aid haversack, used as a lunch bag, over his shoulder, head out across the green with Fred Purse, both pushing their bikes as they headed for work in the forest and at night watch them slowly come home, out of the forest, dead tired and pushing their bicycles with all their saws and axes slung across them. Father was used to hard work and felling trees was all part of his day's work. In those days he had to use an axe, wedges and a two handed saw, not a chain saw as today. After the Second World War he was asked to make a cross to remember the Canadian Servicemen that were billeted in the New Forest and had been killed in the war. He cut a cross of oak and it was placed in the forest as a memorial. This spot is still the Canadian Memorial site today and in the 1990s, with his original cross being fifty years old, it was replaced with the existing cross.

When I started school, I went to the Lyndhurst Church of England School. The school was situated on the left hand side of the road, just before the cross roads as you enter the town from the west. Being in the infants my class would always leave the main school and be taken up the road by our teacher Miss Payne to the nearby hall. It was here we had our first lessons. My first day I did not want to go into school and cried and there was a tug-of-war between the teacher trying to get me in school and mother trying to take me home. In those early days I was always walked to school and back by mother. This was a round trip each time of a few miles, but was no hardship to her as she would walk to Lyndhurst and back to do her shopping.

Sometimes I would go with mother into Lyndhurst shopping. We would go into International Stores, which was locally known as "Inters" and I would walk along the rows of open topped square metal biscuit tins indicating the biscuits we liked so that the grocer could put them into a paper bag. We would then go into Miss Blake's shop for mother's wool. This was the shop which housed all the cottons, needles and knitting materials. Then it was the Baker's shop for bread and the Dairy for our milk. If I was tired we would catch a bus home as far as Bank and walk the rest of the way.

When I was old enough, I rode my bicycle to school with my friend from next door, Betty Blake. We would cycle along Pinkney Lane and the other back lanes to keep off the main roads. Not that the main roads were very busy in the mid 1950s and we did not see a motor car down in Gritnam. Father bought me my own bike from 'Ayles' in Lyndhurst. It was made by Raleigh and was a lovely blue.

Mother would take Jenny and I to watch father play cricket on Swan Green, Lyndhurst, just down the road from where he was born at Ship Cottage, Emery Down. The green was just across the road from the Swan Green Tea Rooms, where mother worked before she married. We would walk up and cross the main road and sit at the main road corner of the ground at the Bank end. We would often picnic there. Sometimes, for a treat at weekends, father would take us up to the Royal Oak public house. We

would have to sit outside as children were not allowed in public houses and father would bring out a glass of lemonade and either a packet of crisps or a chocolate wafer.

Playing at home was wonderful, we had the forest to ourselves. With my sister and the other children from our hamlet, especially my friend Betty Blake, and occasionally my friend Ann Lee, who lived in the big house at Bank called Fox Lees which later became the Girl Guides Headquarters, I would play on the green and in the stream that ran through the forest in front of the cottage. A stream I often fell in. We would run through the forest, lay and play hide and seek in the long ferns, have swings in the trees or we would go down through the forest and play on the sewage work's revolving pipes. We would roam all through our little section of the forest, and would go down through the forest to what we would call the 'big river', although it was only a few inches deep in summer and about 10 feet wide. Here we would play on the little wooden bridge. Sometimes when playing I would hang over the side with my head down, catching stickle-backs in the river. We would ride about on our bicycles, up and down the gravel tracks. We loved the forest and used every light hour of the day for play, but the summer days always went by too quick and the school holidays just flew by. Living in the forest we had a cat called Sandy and a dog called Punch, both of which accompanied us where ever we went.

With the coming of autumn the forest would change her coats and dresses. Nuts would fall off the trees and we would gather them for Guy Fawkes' night and Christmas, although many were eaten as they were collected. One autumn night we all waited for was what we called 'Bonfire Night'. Living in the forest we had plenty of fallen wood to put on our bonfire, which was always situated in the clearing out on the green and well away from the forest. The families would put their fireworks together and we would have a great show. None of us children ever wanted it to stop, and no-one ever wanted to go to bed. But like all good things, it did stop and we had to go to bed.

Winters in the New Forest were also special. We would walk in the mornings to find the dew frozen on the trees making them sparkle all over like crystal chandeliers. Some winters when we had snow the whole area, including every tree, would be clothed in white and the forest would be so quiet you could only hear yourself breathe. We would play in the snow making snowmen and snow-balling until our hands and feet were so cold we had to go indoors with the pain. When it snowed we used to go down the hill on our sledge. We would lay on our fronts and go down head first. At Christmas even our Christmas tree came from the forest. Father would cut down a lovely tree and bring it home for us all to decorate. The dark winter nights were the time for telling stories. When sat around the roaring fire on a cold winter's evening mother would often tell us the story of how during the war father would be stationed, one or two nights a week, up the fire tower look-out in the forest watching for fires. Mother would put our brother Bill in his pram and push him through the dark forest to the tower with father's supper. Father would also tell us stories, his favourite being about some of the Canadian troops, near where he was working, playing ball by using an orange to throw to each other. The orange was dropped and fell to the ground. A young forest lad seeing it, ran over picked it up and ran off with it. The Canadians got angry saying the lad had stole the orange, until father reminded them that the children in this country had not seen oranges for a long time, if ever. The Canadians agreed with him and soon saw sense.

My father came from a large New Forest family and all my Uncles, Aunts and Cousins living throughout the New Forest from Sway through to Brockenhurst, Lyndhurst, Hythe and as far as Totton. With mother we loved to visit our Grandparents Wollaston

at 'Springfield' in Brockenhurst. Sometimes we would go for the day walking there through the forest and catch the bus home.

I took my eleven-plus school examinations at Lyndhurst, but before I went to the Secondary school father secured a job as Forest Manager for the Pickton Estates in Somerset. And so it was I left my beloved Forest, the place I had lived for eleven wonderful years, but with so many relations living there, I knew I would visit whenever possible. And as fortune had it, it was also not the last time I would visit Gritnam, nor our little cottage, for father's brother Maurice, also a Forester, moved into 'The Nest' as we left, and I felt my link with my lovely New Forest would be maintained for ever.