

# A Classical Archaeologist's Life: The Story so Far

An autobiography

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## **A Note to the Reader**

I started writing this some ten years ago, since I had still vivid recollection of growing up in a London suburb and of school during wartime, and I wanted to share the experience, primarily with my family. But becoming an 'academic' and life at university, then in Greece, seemed no less worth recall since so much has changed. The exercise was habit-forming and I continued into closer inspection of experiences overseas, distant travels (more than just Mediterranean cruises) and the many other things that can happen in a longish life. I have not been much helped by diaries since they have been more aides-memoires than deliberate records, and the best, wartime, are missing. I am now nearly 92 and my memory is fading for both the past and even the recent present. So it has seemed desirable to try to 'finish'. The order of chapters is not strictly logical.

Part I deals with family life, travelling, excavation, personalia. Part II deals with academic life in Oxford and elsewhere, and with the writing of books; I discuss my role as a teacher too, and my pupils, and travels for lectures and various academic projects. Part III deals with my preoccupation with the study of ancient gems and the resultant publications. I add a Bibliography of my publications.

I have to acknowledge the great help given me in preparing and especially in finishing this book by Claudia Wagner (Beazley Archive, Oxford) and by my daughter Julia (especially with the illustrations). The Archaeopress editors, Rajka Makjanic and David Davison, have been extremely patient with a rather disorganised author.



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# PART I

## Starters

I was born on 20 August 1927 at 34 Ethelbert Gardens, Ilford, Essex – a seven-roomed terrace house which had been occupied by my parents and brother since it had been built sometime in the early 1920s, quite close to where the Gants Hill tube station on the Central Line is now, in a district known as Redbridge, formerly North Ilford, Essex – now ‘Greater London’.

I was decidedly an unexpected, difficult and bulky but not unwelcome arrival, my mother being already 46 years old and my brother (Frank) my senior by some 16 years. My father was 50. As a result, early years were rather those of an only child, but in a community swarming with contemporaries, several of them real ‘only children’. I was also a large and somnolent baby. My earliest recollection, which I recovered while having absolutely nothing else to do, standing night guard at Aldershot in the winter of 1950, is of being in my pram, observing the lace hood dancing before my eyes, and feeling intensely warm and comfortable, not required to manage my own locomotion or really do anything at all. I always overslept. It took a long time for me to be persuaded to walk and do things for myself, and in some ways I have spent my life trying to recapture that sense of idle security, and failing. Old age begins to come close to it but it brings anxiety as well.

In early years I slept in a cot at the corner of the parental bedroom. Thence I could creep into the big bed in the morning, especially at weekends, and make my way through layers of blankets and sheets. It was a brass bedstead with globular mouldings which were sometimes loose and could be slid up and down like an abacus. The big bed was mine in various illnesses – generally unexplained high temperatures. Later I had a room of my own and could tap the wall to communicate with the girl next door. I commonly slept with one or more limbs outside the bedcover, and sometimes still do.

Gants Hill now has its own website which reveals that its 21st-century geography broadly resembles its 20th-century original, although not in details. The name is alleged to have either a respectable mediaeval origin from a noble family, or to be derived from the gnats which swarmed there when it was mainly swamp. The environment, without the gnats, must have been typical

of most of the simpler London suburbs in the 1930s. There was open country (Wanstead, Hainault and Epping forests) or a good park (Valentines, Clayhall) easily accessible by foot or bicycle. Otherwise there were the roads to play in, relatively unencumbered by cars since the neighbourhood was generally non-car-owning. But I have a vivid memory of a very close view of the radiator of a car which had stopped just in time; I must have been about five. Milk arrived by horse and cart, bread in a one-man sedan chair with wheels, ice-cream on summer afternoons by tricycle (Walls, of course), and there were two or three deliveries of post each day. Street repair involved the arrival of steam-rollers with clanking chains and whistles. The nearest telephone was ten doors away, the possession of another, unrelated Boardman; no car, no refrigerator (but a real larder). A rather frightening brass cylinder with a gas jet heated the bath water; my bath toy was a wooden Indian canoe which had lost all its Indians and paint. Friday night was bath night; otherwise there was the technique of 'washing up as far as possible and down as far as possible'.

All in all life was comfortably middle-class suburban with no pretensions to being 'upper'; indeed the journalist Jeremy Clarke (*The Spectator* 28 October 2006, 72-3), referring to his family in the immediate neighbourhood, identified by the 'Beehive pub', calls it 'solidly lower-middle', 'in modest houses of similar design'. The streets had trees along them. Our house was in a terrace of pebble-dash fronts. It had a good long living room ('lounge'), front-to back, with an active fireplace for coal, and doors opening on to the garden. It also accommodated a mini-piano, played by my brother. There was a smallish kitchen; a front room for special occasions, such as was normal in such houses – it was a form of 'parlour' for the better furniture and also housed a goldfish bowl. Neglected, the fish nevertheless survived being iced in from time to time. Three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs with the gas-geyser. There was a short front garden, including a *Montbretia* bush which my father thought should give its name to the house, but he never got round to making a sign for it; a back garden, about 25 yards long, small but packed with flowers, several fruit trees (apple, plum), currant, raspberry and loganberry bushes, rhubarb, and enough grass to sit out on – dug up for vegetables during the war. The near end was paved (father playing with moulding coloured slabs of concrete), flanked by roses, including an enormous white rose tree from Woolworths, a great Victoria plum tree, a coal shed and a garden shed in total disorder but packed with potential mystery for the young, as well as a museum-piece cast-iron-framed mangle. The fence at one side had a movable plank so that conversation with Mrs Barron next door could be conducted easily. On that side

there was just Mrs B and her widow-daughter Edythe, who were well spoken (if with a Scottish accent). The other side was more accessible – the Whites, who were rather noisier. Their children – Stanley Baldwin White (older than I); Winnie, the ‘girl next door’ who was not to be, because she got evacuated in 1938, and when she came back in 1945 she was both taller and more adult than I; and Wilfred (Fiff), the youngest, with a large shaggy dog called To-To.

I revisited ‘no. 34’ in 2012 in the company of my daughter Julia and Jeremy. It was occupied by a genial Jewish family running a printing company. The old front door with its stained glass had been retained, also the banisters, the kitchen revamped with a fridge not a larder and the ‘French doors’ on to the garden gone. The ‘under stairs’ area is approached now from the hall corridor, not the kitchen. The garden had lost all its trees and flowers and was rather bare but for grass. It looked strangely smaller. The changes were nearly enough to render it unrecognisable. Much, indeed most, of the Gants Hill area is now occupied by Asian families, while Redbridge School, flourishing still, has a mixed bag of nationalities. I paid it a visit and was shown round. It displayed pictures of the original staff, whom I could recognise. The children were multi-ethnic and seemed well looked after and cheerful. In general, the streets in the area seem far quieter, Valentines Park tidier but deserted. In 2015, 34 Ethelbert Gardens was being advertised for sale at nearly a quarter of a million pounds, and it is said that the population there is more Jewish than Asian.

Other mates also got evacuated – notably Jimmy Steer, with whom I used to go on evening outings to Wanstead or other open areas – only once being brought home by the police who had been sent out to look for us – we had no idea of time. Otherwise, Valentines Park was, and I expect still is, a major resource, roughly a mile in extent, the grounds of a house used by the Council in my day for, among other things, the dental clinic for school children (extractions and fillings under gas!). It included much open grassland but also two lakes, a pond for model boats (I had a yacht and a wind-up speedboat, but the Park website reveals that the pond has fallen out of use), a small woodland with hilly paths, a rose garden where the elderly and blind sat and had the daily papers read to them by volunteers, a swimming pool, tennis courts, the favourite ground for the Essex County cricket team, a bandstand, and an open-air Saturday-night entertainment of song, dance and sketches, very like the end-of-the-pier entertainment of the day and watched from deckchairs. We went to the swimming pool every Sunday morning. Once we were turned out of the pool because there was a violent thunderstorm, and on the way home we saw two lightning-struck bodies laid out beneath the tree under which they

had unhappily sought shelter. I wonder how much of London's suburbia was so well supplied with the necessities for an active but not over-ambitious boyhood and for basically stay-at-home families. In icy weather, when the pool in the park froze over, you could chuck stones to skim across the ice so that they squealed, but passers-by thought we were tormenting the ducks and stopped us. There were several hidden corners by streams and bushes for hiding out. I revisited the park recently – very little changed but some tidier brickwork round gardens.

We were returning from a swim at Valentines Park when, on a Sunday at 11 am, the air-raid sirens announced the start of World War II. Ethelbert Gardens was only slightly, though often damaged during the war, mainly from shrapnel and incendiary bombs. We had to carry gasmask cases and learn how to wear the masks, but not for long. The street has since been lightly refaced, and moved upmarket with front gardens paved to take the SUVs. Its fate and potentially changed appearance used to be a fairly regular subject for my dreams until I revisited it after an absence of nearly 40 years. The street itself was quite rustic, still edged by trees, with privet hedges in most (not our) front gardens, only two or three houses with garages. Shops were not far away – a Sainsbury's with the old gilt and marble decor, wooden pats for measuring out and weighing the butter; a good fish shop; a W.H. Smith's; and a splendid 1934 sub-art-deco Savoy cinema where the under-age could always find an adult to buy a ticket, and where Saturday mornings could be spent, free, cheering on the good cowboys (white hats) chasing the bad (black). It later became a multi-screen Odeon and was demolished in 2003. This is the sort of nostalgic reminiscing which is perhaps of passing interest only to coevals, but I see no good reason to suppress it – it was all part of growing up. Even when quite small I was allowed to go shopping, coins wrapped in a list in hand, potatoes 1d a pound, seven pounds for 6d. Bread came wrapped only in a piece of tissue paper, and the concept of a pre-sliced loaf was only rumoured. The doctor at the corner of the road, Israel Sidney Gold, was not only a good family doctor but also seemed to serve as counsellor and almost parish priest for the whole community, otherwise totally non-Jewish, I believe, and was much respected by everyone. Later, it seems, the area became more Jewish. Modern Gants Hill has two synagogues, a mosque, five Christian churches (C. of E., R.C., Baptist, Methodist, Evangelical). But back to the family.