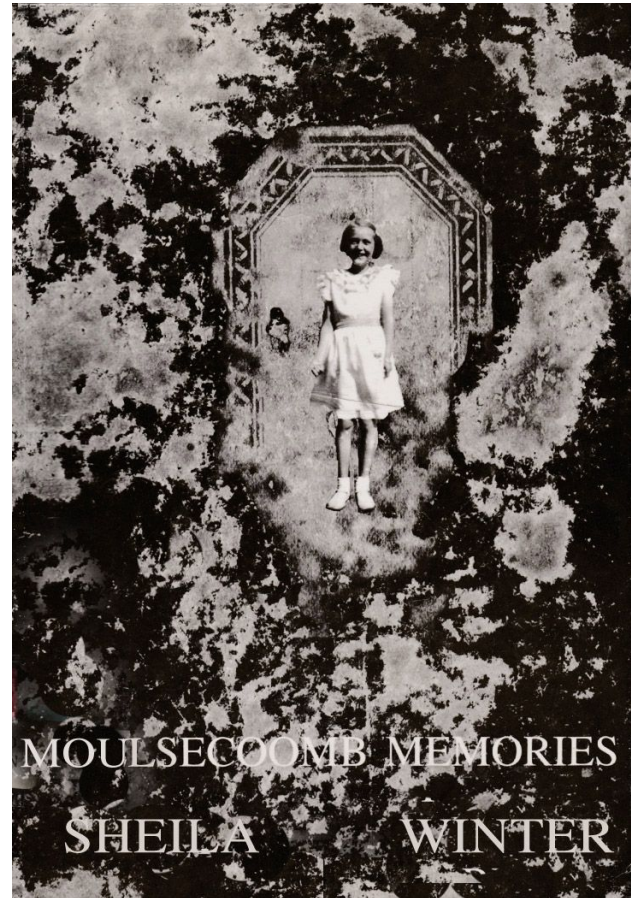


About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

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About this book

MOULSECOOMB MEMORIES

Growing up in Moulsecoomb in the Thirties and Forties

Sheila Winter's 1998 memoir recalls the growth of the community of Moulsecoomb. Sheila was born, raised and married in the area, and narrates the story of her life during the years between 1929 and 1950.

Sheila's father was badly injured in the First World War, and although the estate was built as "homes fit for heroes", times were still hard and the house was so cold that the family were forced to burn old shoes and books to keep warm. In the late 30s an outbreak of diphtheria on the estate led to the death of a number of children.

Sheila recalls local tradespeople, shops and characters, as well as the gradual development of the estate.

Through her eyes, the reader learns of the pleasures of childhood, despite the hardships and restrictions brought about by the Second World War. In this autobiography Sheila shares with the reader her personal hopes, fears, struggles and achievements as she describes her life's progression. Above all, the resilience of the human spirit shines through this honest and reflective account of one woman's life history.

The foreword is written by Ruby Dunn, author of *Moulsecoomb Days*, published by QueenSpark books in 1990 and now available as a pay-what-you-like text PDF download from www.queensparkbooks.org.uk.

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Original 1998 Foreword by Ruby Dunn

In 1922, at the age of eighteen months, I arrived in a pram at my parents' new house on the South Moulsecoomb Estate. In 1929 Sheila Winter (or Watkins as she was then) was born at her family's home in North Moulsecoomb. So although we were both brought up in Moulsecoomb, our childhoods were separate in time and space. Moulsecoomb today may seem to outsiders just one large sprawling estate, but the different neighbourhoods were actually built in stages, so that each felt distinct from the others. As young children Sheila and I found our friends and interests in a very limited area.

In the beginning was South Moulsecoomb: 478 three-bedroomed, semi-detached houses with large gardens built, supposedly as 'home for the heroes' of the 1914-18 War, on land acquired in November 1920. However the high rents proved to be beyond the means of most of the ex-service men for whom they were intended.

Hoping to rectify this mistake, the council built the roads of North Moulsecoomb, as described by Sheila, between 1925 and 1929. They acquired forty-six acres of land opposite the Wild Park and built 390 closely packed houses. The map on the previous pages shows North and South Moulsecoomb as they were in 1929, surrounded by open country.

These early Moulsecoomb estates had one great advantage, the rural beauty of their setting. South Moulsecoomb and Bevendean were contained within the base and hillslopes of a lovely downland valley. North Moulsecoomb was surrounded by farm and woodland, with an equally lovely valley to play in, the Wild Park, which we called the giant's foot because of its shape.

The narrow Lewes Road, linking South to North Moulsecoomb, was lined on the western side by the grounds of Moulsecoomb Place, followed by the fruit orchards belonging to Mr Bates which stretched almost to the railway viaduct by the Wild Park entrance. Proceeding north from the Wild Park, the western side of Lewes Road was given over to market gardens belonging to Mr Woolard. When Brighton Council bought the land, many of his beautiful rare shrubs and trees formed the basis of the landscaping we see today, stretching as far as Coldean Lane, which was truly a country lane leading to West's Farm.

The next development was in the early thirties, when land bought from Lower Bevendean Farm was used to extend South Moulsecoomb up the valley. At the same time similar land was used by Mr Braybon to build a small private estate, Higher Bevendean, which comprised Bevendean Crescent, Medmerry Hill, Widdicombe and Nyetimber Hill.

In December 1935 the council bought land surrounding Hodshrove Farm and adjoining Higher Bevendean to build East Moulsecoomb, an estate of small houses which

stretched to Shortgate Road and was to be inhabited by families from the so - called 'slum areas' of central Brighton. After the Second World War the estate was extended to the north of Shortgate Road and, on the site of Bates Nursery, modern flats were erected which enabled older residents to vacate three-bedroomed houses in favour of younger families.

In the early days no social amenities were provided. Community buildings grew slowly on these estates: St. George's Hall in 1930, St. Francis Hall in the later thirties and South Moulsecoomb Hall in the 1940's. The branch library was initially housed in Moulsecoomb Place, but a permanent library was built in South Moulsecoomb in 1964. Finally a much-praised Community and Leisure Centre was opened in 1990 on a derelict site in East Moulsecoomb (though local residents have complained that the hiring charges are too high for them).

In writing this lively and nostalgic account of her early life, it is clear that Sheila has the same aim as I had when writing *Moulsecoomb Days*, which is to 'put the record straight' about Moulsecoomb and to show from our early lives, despite hardships and poverty, a tradition of vitality and fulfilment.

In recent years a few isolated incidents have helped to condemn Moulsecoomb in the eyes of the public, so that the excellent ongoing work of the Councillors, the Community Association, the churches and the schools in the area tend to be overlooked and forgotten. Despite the struggle of people living on the estates today against the problems of youth alienation, unemployment and deprivation, we can see from the photograph (below) that the friendliness, the caring and the pride of living in a community, as demonstrated by Sheila Winter in these early memories, are still alive and flourishing in Moulsecoomb of the 1990's.

Ruby Dunn, 1998

MOULSECOOMB MEMORIES

THE VERY BEGINNING

My parents, Edith and Ernest Watkins, moved to North Moulsecoomb in November 1927. My mother told me that it was a day that she would never forget. It was so cold, wet and muddy and rather spoilt the joy she had felt at getting a new house at last.

The move was so traumatic because the furniture had to be slid down a muddy bank, which was to be the front garden. My father was in a panic about his precious piano with the two brass candlesticks on it. This piece of furniture was his pride and joy. He was a talented pianist, though he described himself as an 'ear merchant'. He could not read music at all. Playing was, to him, as natural as breathing, he said.

Dad was born in the year 1896 in Ivory Place, Brighton, one of a family of six, all with musical skills. Later the family moved to Nelson Row. Both places have now been demolished, to make way for high rise blocks of flats.

Mum was not born in Brighton, but in Catford, and the family moved down to Brighton when she was four years old. They lived at first in a cottage in Upper Gardener Street, after which they moved to Lynton Street in Elm Grove.

Dad had been badly wounded in the First World War. His face and legs were peppered with shrapnel and his lungs were full of the noxious mustard gas from the fields of Flanders. He was still a young man when he was invalided out of the army, but he knew that he would never become an old man.

Mum and Dad were married at St Peter's Church and went to lodge in two rooms in Sussex Terrace. My brother was born there. He was a sickly child who was not expected to survive, but against all the odds he did, although he was always very frail. Then my sister was born and the two rooms were not sufficient to raise a family. When the houses were built at North Moulsecoomb they were allocated 16 Chailey Road. These houses were built for ex-war veterans and Dad qualified.

The house was next to a cinder path. People used the path constantly to get to the bus stop. It was a well-used path for a gossip and a laugh.

North Moulsecoomb was made up of four roads, each named after villages to the north of Lewes. There was Ringmer, Chailey, Newick and Barcombe Roads, all of which led down to the main Lewes Road.

Of course it took a while for shops to come to the area. Mum had to put the children into the pram and walk either to the town, or to The Avenue in South Moulsecoomb, where there were a couple of shops. My brother was five years old and he still could not walk, so it must have been a hard task for Mum to push a heavy pram all that way.

The house proved to be a very cold one and money was so tight. Dad could only work when he was well, and that wasn't very often. The men of Moulsecoomb were a mixture of trades, plumbers, glaziers, builders, bus drivers, railway workers, plus quite a few 'Jacks of All Trades', of which my Dad was one. Painting and decorating was his real trade, but the paint upset his weakened lungs, so he was often out of work.

After the strike of 1926 every man's job was a precious thing. There was always someone waiting to jump into the shoes of another. Dad did receive a pittance of a pension for his wounds, but there were no state handouts in those days, so by the time the rent was paid there was precious little to spare for much else.

Mum and Dad had to burn old shoes, hardback books, in fact anything that gave out a bit of warmth. Dad had a wry sense of humour. He found a piece of wood and planed it off. Then he painted the name 'SIBERIA' on it and hung it above the front door. The Corporation did not see the funny side of it and ordered Dad to remove it, or else!

I didn't come on the scene until 1929. Another mouth to feed, but I was a healthy baby and was quite content to have my mother's milk, until it ran out. Luckily it went on for rather a long time, so that was a great help.

The houses were fairly large, with three bedrooms, a scullery and a kitchen, plus a 'Holy of Holies', which was the front room, in which all the best furniture was kept. We kids were not allowed into it except on very special occasions. Mum and Dad sometimes sat in there on a Sunday afternoon.

We even had a bathroom with a separate toilet, an airing cupboard at the top of the stairs and an indoor 'coal-hole', which was next to the walk-in larder. All very compact, with plenty of garden to play in.

When Mum and Dad first moved in, Dad found some twigs by the side of the road, which he thought to be privet. So he planted them all around the garden, thinking that they would eventually grow into a nice hedge. These twigs turned into huge cherry trees, all of which bore luscious fruit. I made many friends at cherry time! I used to sit in the trees for hours with a book or a toy and could watch everyone come up or down the path. I did love my tree top house.

Living in North Moulsecoomb in those days was a real pleasure. It was a pretty little place and community spirit was abundant. Neighbours could turn to each other in times of trouble. As for the children, we were so lucky. For our recreation we had the Wild Park, Bevendean, Stanmer Park and Falmer. The pond at Falmer was a very popular place to go. We would take our jam jars, with a bit of string tied round the top, and collect frog spawn from the pond, which we would take home and put on the outside window sill, to watch the progress of our catch.

SETTLING IN

Our parents had no fears for our safety in those days. The worst that could happen was our little legs getting stung by nettles. Our mums would make them better by using their own spit to take the sting out, and it worked. We thought that mums had magic powers. One kiss would make everything feel better.

Over the fields and the parks was an abundance of wild flowers, violets, bee-orchids, tottle grass and cowslips. We were allowed to pick them and we took great bunches home to our mothers. Also in the season we picked blackberries, wild raspberries and wild strawberries, and these were made into jam for our Sunday tea.

In Moulsecoomb we were lucky to have many tradesmen who came around with horse and cart.

Mr Prior lived in Newick Road. He had lost a leg in the First World War and he used to hop round his grocery cart. He called every day, come rain or snow, and the old horse waited patiently with his nosebag on.

Then there was Grooms, the travelling baker. He had a sort of covered wagon. The horse was called Horace and the baker was called Henry. Sometimes we called them by the wrong name but they both reacted to whichever one we chose.

The smell of the freshly baked bread and cakes was too much for we children to ignore, so we would ask Henry if he had any 'stales'. He always managed to find a cake or scone and we had to eat it jolly quick before our mums saw us. We would have had a clip around the ear for asking.

In Newick Road lived Mr and Mrs Moppett and family. Often I would wish that I was a member of that family because Mrs Moppett sold sweets.

She had a tricycle with a huge flattish box laid across the front and on this box were the most mouthwatering sweets. I will name a few of my own favourites. Maybe some people will recall the names: Pegs Bars, Queens Bars, farthing Gollie Bars, everlasting strips, coconut flakes, Double Six, Frys Double Milk, Chocolate Chips, aniseed balls, gobstoppers, Five Boys Chocolate and - the ones I spent my precious money on - Brompton Lozenges! Why I bought mainly cough sweets I cannot think, except perhaps I was intrigued by the little blue box that they were in.

In between Ringmer and Chailey Roads there was an expanse of land which was raised higher than the rest of the streets. This was known as the Dump. There was very little rubbish put upon it as people never really had much to throw away in those days, but it made a wonderful place for us to play. On the Dump we played out our fantasies. We tried to dress up in our mothers' long frocks and high-heeled shoes, that was if we could get them out of the house without being caught!

By the time we were allowed out on our own to play we had chosen our friends, and indeed friendships that were forged in the early 1930s are still as strong to this day. My very best friend was Rosa Hatton who lived in Ringmer Road. To this day, sixty years later, we are still bestest friends and that is how we sign our weekly letters to each other.

VOTE, VOTE, VOTE!

When there was any sort of election on, be it local or general elections, a great excitement swept over the whole neighbourhood, along with a sense of secrecy.

I remember the bunting hanging from window to window and Mum with her friend Mrs Johnson cracking jokes about who was likely to win.

The voting cars were so busy up and down the streets, with megaphones being so well used, we could hardly understand what was being shouted, but we kids were caught up in the intense excitement of the day.

A huge car with an open top always seemed to be the one that mum and her friends preferred. I believe it was called a Morris Cowley. It was beige in colour with a black top rolled back and what Mrs Johnson called a Dickey seat that pulled down at the back. This was the seat that mum and Mrs Johnson always insisted on being 'theirs'. As the car swept off down the road we could hear them laughing, and they sang a voting song. I cannot recall the names of the candidates, but the song went something like this:

*Vote, vote, vote for Mr ***,
Chuck old *** out of town.
For *** is the man
And we'll have him if we can
And we won't let the others get us down.*

Despite the poverty of the day the ladies of Moulsecoomb never let it worry them, not in front of other people. They did their worrying and weeping behind closed doors.

Any excuse for a bit of a knees-up, there was always some refreshment prepared by the ladies and a lot of speculation as to who was going to win the election. When the results came through there were the usual moans and the usual cheers. Everyone discussed the merits and the shortcomings of the various councillors.

As it is now, so it was then. Whichever party was elected, the rich got richer and the poor stayed just as they were.

MRS RINSO AND MRS TUTT

The Moulsecoomb folks were quite used to going without and had various ways of making the most of each day. In the evenings we huddled around a very ancient radio which was run by an accumulator. This had to be topped up every couple of weeks, a very dangerous job because it was full of acid. Dad always saw to this, until we were old enough to take the bus down to Lewes Road.

The radio programmes were very lively. We used to listen to Radio Luxembourg a lot. The Ovalteenies were on once a week. My sister and I were really interested in that and would sing along to the opening and closing songs.

Dad and my brother were avid listeners to Sweeney Todd - The Demon Barber. Sometimes my brother would hold us down and force us to listen to the unfortunate customer, who was sent through the trap door to his death. We always screamed and begged to be let go. I used to have nightmares about it.

The commercials on the radio really caught our attention. I loved the Mrs Rinso one. She used to say:

*Really I'm not joking,
Just twelve minutes for soaking,
And really, for boiling, just two.*

There was also a lady, who often broadcast, called Mrs Feather and she was always on the telephone. Of course, we had no knowledge of that means of communication. None of us were rich enough to have one. But Mrs Feather would get all mixed up with her phone calls and had us in fits of laughter.

Later on, when Tommy Handley had his shows, we thought we were the luckiest people in the world to be able to listen to it. To this day I am a radio fan. I get much more enjoyment from it than from television. At least one could be doing something useful and listen at the same time.

Sunday school was important to us in those days. Being so young, we were not allowed to go far, so we went to a Mrs Tutt's house at 147 Ringmer Road.

In Mrs Tutt's living room we sat in a circle of about five children and she read us stories from the Bible. We sang little songs and, while we were in full swing, Mrs Tutt would go out to the scullery to check on the roast potatoes. We really enjoyed our time with her and we often had one of those golden, crispy potatoes when they were done.

Later on, when we were older, we were sent to St Mary's Sunday School in Brighton. I remember we had a long walk from the bus stop, right up St James' Street and down a

small turning. It was a lovely Sunday School and it was run by a Miss Lancaster, together with her friend Miss Baker. They were such kind ladies. We adored them and they taught us well.

I was still quite young, about eight years of age, so my sister had to make sure that I was safe. Very often we spent our penny bus fare on sweets and so had a very long walk home.

Miss Lancaster gave me a most beautiful doll, the first big doll I ever owned. I called her Janet. She was almost as tall as me and was double-jointed. How proud I was of that doll. Janet was the best present I ever had and she gave me hours of pleasure. The only thing was that I never realised what a valuable doll she was and I used to feed her with bits of rice pudding and the occasional drop of tea. In the end she reeked to high heaven and had to be buried in the garden, where she probably is to this day.

Another constant source of entertainment was, of course, the piano. By the time I was four years old, I too began to play and was, just like my Dad, an 'ear merchant'. I could not, and would not, be taught, because playing to me was as natural as breathing. Dad took me to Mrs Campbell, who was a music teacher, but I learned nothing. The mere mention of 'scales' and I became agitated, so I was soon left to get on with it in my own way. I was invited to lots of parties, mainly to play for them.

SHOPS AND SCHOOL

By the early 1930s, the row of shops was built in Barcombe Road, and they were a real asset to Moulsecomb. We only had to walk down the cinder path into Newick Road, cut through to Barcombe Road, a few yards along there and we were at the shops.

Mr and Mrs Sandall had the grocery shop. They were such a lovely couple and nothing was too much trouble for them. I will always retain in my memory the row of mahogany drawers that lined the walls behind the counter. All polished and with shiny brass handles. In those drawers were loose sugar, sultanas, raisins and currants. Also, loose chocolate powder, coconut, glace cherries. They emitted a scent which was sheer pleasure. Hanging from the counter were various-sized thick blue bags, into which the sugar, etc was weighed. The beauty of buying it, this way was that we only need ask for what could be afforded. So I was often sent to Sandalls for a ha'porth of coconut, or two ounces of sugar and a quarter of marge. Just enough for Mum to make a few buns, and that was not very often.

There were four shops in all, the grocers, chemist-cum-Post Office, a butcher and a sweet-shop. Next to the sweet-shop, on a triangular piece of land, was a petrol pump. It was rarely used by locals and we saw very few cars on our estate.

The shops were a great place for the ladies to stand and have a gossip, usually ending in gales of laughter. I used to stand by Mum's side, hopping from one foot to the other,

wishing she would hurry up, mainly because I wanted to sample what she had in her bag!

Dad was getting weaker every day. There were times when he had to lie on the old horsehair sofa. Then the doctor would give him some more medicine, or send him to the hospital for a week or so and he would return reasonably well, until the next time.

1934 was the year that I began school, very reluctantly. To be taken away from my constant play and away from Mum was a very traumatic time for me.

Miss Bell was my first teacher, a lovely gentle lady with very dark hair, which was drawn back into a bun. She wore large glasses.

We children went to bed every afternoon for the first few months. A sort of canvas truckle-bed. I could see no point in having to go to sleep when it would have been easier to sleep at home and, although I ran home a few times, I was always dragged back to the dreaded school.

Miss Tidy was the Headmistress of the Infants' School. She was a short, stout lady who wore a lot of russet-coloured clothes and, always, a hat. I was terrified of her but once, when I had been very ill with measles, Mum took me back to school and Miss Tidy took me into her office and let me dip my hand into a jar of sweet fishes. That put her up in my estimation.

My progress through the Infants' and Junior schools was quite unremarkable. I don't think that I made much of an impression on anyone at all. Home time was the only part of the school day that I liked.

I do recall a lot of the teachers, mainly because I had to spend so much time either being 'kept in', or having my hand whacked with the cane.

In the Junior School, Miss Avery was one of the best cane wielders. She was a tiny woman with a very strong hand! There was also Mr Hibbert, Mr Huddart and Mr Burroughs. The Headmaster was Mr Kitchen and I remember him very clearly indeed. I went to great lengths to keep out of his way, even hiding in the lavatories until it was home time. How I ever learned anything is quite beyond me.

FRIENDS AND RELATIONS

Grannies and Grandads were very special people in our lives and, each Sunday afternoon or evening, we were taken into Brighton to see them.

'Up Granny and Grandad' lived in Lynton Street, in Elm Grove, while 'Down Granny', who was a widow, lived in Milner Flats. We always looked forward to the treats that would be waiting for us. 'Up Granny' always saved us the buttered crusts from her bread

and 'Down Granny' had some of her hard-bake cakes for us. Dad would throw these cakes into the air and hit the ceiling. If they broke, he would complain that she had not baked them for long enough.

We were taught to respect our Grandparents, speak when we were spoken to and never to interrupt their conversation. At Milner Flats there was often a party that took place. Along the whole of the forecourt, tables were laid in rows, filled with all sorts of goodies, lots of lemonade and a few bottles of stout for the ladies. The men had a barrel of beer.

We also had street parties in Moulsecoomb, when everyone supplied whatever food they could. As it was mainly for the children, there were lots of little bags of sweets, to be handed to every child, when the party was over. Although the Moulsecoomb people were not at all well off, they always pulled together for such occasions. Of course, there were one or two who did not join in, but they were in the minority.

Mrs Hills lived in Ringmer Road and, we thought, was the best toffee-apple maker ever. Several of the ladies tried to supplement their income by making and selling various goodies, but Mrs Hills came top of the polls with we ever-hungry kids. One penny would buy the biggest toffee-apple on a stick but if we could not find a whole penny, then a halfpenny would buy a toffee poker.

Pocket money was very scarce in those days and, unless a generous Auntie visited and left a shilling or two, we were limited to about a penny a week, to spend on treats. Our halfpenny a day milk money at school very often found its way to Mrs Moppett's barrow, which used to stand near St George's Hall. When we were on our way to school it presented a great temptation to which I, for one, often succumbed. I much preferred sweets to milk, that was my way of excusing myself, but sometimes word got back to Mum, then I was in real trouble.

In the late thirties there was a terrible epidemic of diphtheria in Moulsecoomb. So many children were taken ill with it, and a few died. A little girl who lived opposite us was one of the unlucky ones. She was such a pretty child. Everyone said that she had the face of an angel. I recall her white blond ringlets and very blue eyes, and she was about four years old. One day we saw her dancing on the doorstep and the next day we heard she had died. In my mind I can always see the little white coffin being carried from the house.

We were all vaccinated at this time against the infection, a painful process, but eventually this dreadful disease was eliminated. The children who died were buried in a small cemetery at Falmer. It was a small piece of land set aside from the larger cemetery. Rosa and I often went to visit the graves and to put small posies of wild flowers on them. We wondered then if there was a Heaven. The discussions went on for hours, with descriptions of Angels. Did they really stand by our beds at night to guard us?

THE HIKERS REST

In 1937 joy came to North Moulsecoomb in the shape of our very own public house, the Hikers Rest. It was somewhere for the menfolk to go and still be near home in case of any emergency. Mrs Bennett was the landlady, a tall, imposing lady with long, very dark clothes. She was very strict, would stand no nonsense. One foot out of line and the wrongdoer was barred. I suppose there must have been a Mr Bennett but I cannot recall him.

The men scraped their coppers together to make enough for a pint of beer that would last them all evening. My dad soon found the piano and played all the popular tunes of the day. The Hikers rang with the music and the singing.

At last there was a place for the men of Moulsecoomb to gather together and discuss the unrest that was already in evidence across the Channel. True, they were only rumours at that time, but these men had already fought in the war to end all future wars and most of them bore the scars either in their body or in their minds.

The Hikers Rest made such a difference in Moulsecoomb. Some of the men spent the housekeeping money on beer, and it was quite a common sight to see an irate wife striding purposefully down the cinder path and towards the Hikers. I remember one such lady, who always wore her husband's cap and slippers, going down the cinder path with a plate of dinner in her hand. We were told afterwards that she stormed into the public bar, where her errant husband was laughing with his mates, a pint of beer in his hand. She swung the plate, dinner and all, at him, saying: 'If you can't get home for it you can ***** well have it here!'

That was the talk of the estate for months afterwards. Mum told Dad that she would do the same if he ever overstayed his time in the pub.

The ladies of Moulsecoomb decided that if they could not always have their husbands home, then they would join them in the Hikers now and again. Of course, not everybody frequented the pub, but of those who did, well, the wives did too.

A small bunch of ladies sort of took over a corner of the public bar and became known as the Hikers Girls. Such fun was had by them, in the days of nothing very much. They made the most of whatever came their way. Money did not allow more than one glass of milk stout, but that was enough, and started them singing.

Some folks looked down their noses at the ladies, but in all walks of life there are some who see things as 'not quite nice'. We children were never neglected. There was a childrens' room at the side of the public bar and we usually went in there with our dolls and played safely until it was time to go home, but never at night, not in the late hours.

There was nothing to stop us hearing the songs that were sung. I learned so many of the old songs from that pub. Some I could not understand, but I could always play them when I got home.

One song that sticks in my mind goes as follows:

*The broker's man is sitting on the backyard wall,
Waiting for his two pounds two.
The poor little bantam in the rabbit hutch
Can't say cock-a-doodle-do.
The Mother-in-Law has shot the moon,
The mice have ate the small tooth comb.
And Mother's got the rolling-pin,
Waiting till you do come in,
Father, Father, do come home.*

This song was always followed by gales of laughter, but I never really understood it all.

So many songs. Sad ones that had tears flowing down everyone's cheeks. Funny, two-sided songs. Mrs Johnson, or Fan, as we knew her, always sang, 'Ring down the curtain, I can't sing tonight'. Now that was a very sad song and always reduced me to tears, but it would be quickly followed by a comic ditty to restore a happy atmosphere once again.

The Hikers Rest was situated a few hundred yards into Coldean Lane, opposite a sawmill which led into Stanmer Park woods. Just in front of the Hikers were two cottages with very long gardens which ended at the borders of Woolards apple orchards. In one of the cottages lived Mr and Mrs Hazeldine, a sweet, elderly couple who lived for their garden. They both looked very weather-beaten from always being out in all weathers. Mrs Hazeldine always wore a navy blue straw hat and a skirt down to her ankles, and she was always smiling. The garden was a picture with every conceivable flower in abundance. I often wonder what the old couple must have felt when their peaceful life was invaded by happy Hikers Rest customers.

PLAYTIME IN MOULSECOOMB

We had a season for everything in Moulsecoomb, top and whip, hoops, skipping, but most of all and the biggest event was called 'Tab-a-Go'. This was always held in Newick Road and children came from far and wide to join in.

The idea of 'Tab-a-Go' was to see how many 'tabs' we could win. 'Tabs' were cigarette cards, which used to come inside packets of Wild Woodbines or Players cigarettes.

We devised all kinds of ways to win our tabs and take as many as we could, by fair means and foul, from our friends.

I used to borrow one of my mother's books and, into a few pages, I'd insert a tab. The competitors would come with a tab and place it between the pages of the almost closed book. If there was a tab already there, then they had won it. But, if the page was empty, then their tab was left there. By the end of the day we would count up our tabs, hoping to have more than when we began. We usually did!

Other methods of winning tabs were by rolling allies, or glass marbles, into an upside-down shoe box, which had numbered holes in the side. If the ally ran into a hole with a tab inside, then that was a win. However, it cost a tab to have a go, hence the name of the game.

The six weeks of summer holidays were never boring. We could go to St George's Hall, where there was always something going on, thanks to Mrs Hyder, who lived in Chailey Road. She and her husband were tireless workers for the community. They had their own family, yet always made time to put on a show, help with the girls' club and have little groups of children there at the Hall to sing hymns, and tell us stories of Jesus. We really did not have the chance to go wild and get into mischief. There was far too much going on.

Every year, near to Whitsuntide, the Hikers Rest took over a large portion of the Wild Park, for the Bat and Trap competition. This entailed a good percentage of the male customers, all of whom threw themselves into the day with great gusto. They humped barrels of beer and bottles of stout, with lots of lemonade and crisps for the children. It was a family fun day and we all took sandwiches. The fun began around 10.30 a.m. and it always seemed to be warm and sunny.

The actual game was a cross between cricket and rounders. The trap was a block of wood with a spring, on which was balanced another piece of wood, with an indentation the size of a tennis or cricket ball. The men lined up with their bats and a lightweight ball was placed in the indent. The first man would hit the back of the trap, the ball would fly high into the air and the running would begin. The laughter began too, as the liquid refreshments started to have their effect!

We children either watched the game, or devised some of our own, all waiting for the treat that would come when the game was finished and the victors had been toasted and cheered. Once this was over the shout went up, 'SCRAMBLES'. On hearing this, the men dug into their pockets to find the coppers, or even threepenny bits, which were then tossed into the air. We kids scrambled in the grass to see how many we could gather. I can truly say that not one blade of grass was left unturned. We had a lovely time, with rare cash in our pockets.

THE ASSETS OF MOULSECOOMB

We were proud to have our very own policeman and doctor in North Moulsecoomb. Although there was no NHS in those days and we did not call upon the doctor if we could help it, it was nevertheless a comfort to know that Dr Rutherford was there if we needed him.

He held a surgery in Mrs Akehurst's front room in Barcombe Road, and though we were a bit scared of him, he was always available and willingly came to the house. His fee was about ninepence a time, a lot of money at that time.

Dad saw the doctor quite a lot, but every now and then he had to go to the hospital to have his lungs drained. He was a very sick man and even had to go to a TB hospital in Bournemouth, where he was made to sleep out in the open.

The policeman was called Mr Hyams, and he did a wonderful job in keeping law and order, at the same time being a good friend to everyone. Now I was quite convinced that Mr Hyams was gifted with eyes at the back of his head, as well as both sides. He knew absolutely everything that went on. He seemed to be everywhere at the same time. Once when I decided to scump a few apples from Woolards orchard at the bottom of Coldean Lane, I squeezed through the iron railings. Being the thinnest of my friends, I was able to get through easily. I had not thought about getting out again with my jumper stuffed with green apples.

As I backed out through the railings my shoulders got stuck and a pair of strong hands tried to pull me through. I realised with horror that it was Mr Hyams. Even now I can recall the sheer panic, like electric shocks going all over my body. Now a clip around the ear would have been in order had I been a boy, but I did not escape punishment, although I did not realise until the next day just what my punishment would be.

Mr Hyams made me stand and eat a good many of the very green apples. They were horribly sour but I chomped my way through them, thinking that I had got away with it nicely. It was my mum that had to call out Dr Rutherford the next day, for my very bad tummy ache. I never scumped again!

We had so many places to play. Bevendean was not yet built on so there were the lovely hills full of cowslips, and woods full of purple, sweet-scented violets. In the autumn we picked baskets of blackberries for our mothers to make jam. Surrounded by the hills, we loved life, and felt so safe down in our little valley.

Not for long, though. I was ten and a half when the storm clouds of war became a reality. For a couple of years the rumours that preceded it had been discussed at great length in the Hikers Rest. I was terrified at the very thought of it and of the fact that I would soon be due to go into the senior girls' school.

MOULSECOOMB GOES TO WAR

When Neville Chamberlain announced that we were now at war, I did not really understand why my Mum and Dad started to cry. They were huddled over the weak accumulator wireless. The next door neighbours came running into our house. The lady from across the road came in too. All had tears running down their cheeks, so I thought I'd better join in too. Dad made me go outside, but I only went as far as the back door and could still hear all that was being said.

Mr Johnson and Dad were saying that all that they had fought for in 1914-18 was all for nothing, but at least, because of their injuries, they were unable to take part in this one. I heard Dad swear about Adolf Hitler and his armies, that were marching into whichever country took their fancy. So I went out on to the cinder path and held court out there with all my friends. I repeated what Dad had said, swear words and all. I felt so grown-up being able to say rude words, though I was only ten and a half. Mum had come out of the house to see where I was, and, of course, heard everything I had said. To my dying shame, she grabbed hold of my arm and gave me a whack for using bad language. I remember my friends sniggering as they ran away.

A sort of apprehension came over everyone on the estate. At first, people were reluctant to go out of their houses, in case they were not there when they got back.

Some of the lads of Moulsecoomb had already been called up for active service. Most of them were only eighteen and we watched them go down the cinder path with their tearful families, on their way to the bus stop, en route to the station.

Dad wept every time he saw a young lad go down the path. He said, 'God bless them and Heaven help them'.

Brighton station was a hive of industry, with the new army of recruits, looking so uncertain, their mothers' arms around them. Mum said they were still babes in arms to their mothers.

The ladies of Moulsecoomb did not sit at home and weep. As soon as they had seen their sons off, they volunteered to do manual work in the factories. Allen West was full of women in snoods, working at what used to be a man's job. Mum worked there for a while and my sister went there as soon as she had left school. Everyone was determined to 'do their bit'.

Firewatchers were needed to patrol the streets at night, on the lookout for incendiary bombs. Mum, Fan Johnson, Mrs Brazil and others decided to do it, as well as their day work, keeping house and looking after the kids. The ladies of Moulsecoomb were used to hard times.

These ladies never let the grass grow under their feet. At the first instruction to start firewatching, they picked up their buckets of sand and, armed with that and a shovel, they went out as soon as dusk fell.

Had Adolf Hitler or any of his henchmen decided to invade North Moulsecoomb, they would have been in for a shock. The intrepid ladies wore their tin helmets with pride and there was such banter and laughter in the streets, the enemy would have taken to their heels. Fan Johnson's laugh would have seen to that!

The fact was, we all felt so safe in our houses, and our mums were always within sight and sound of us. If we had any trouble we only had to yell out of the bedroom window and mums would come running.

The time came when everyone was asked to give their pots and pans to the war effort. The iron railings by the orchards running along at the bottom of Coldean Lane were the first things to go. Everything seemed to change for a while. Moulsecoomb had to adjust to a vastly different way of life, like having table shelters installed in the house. Not everyone had one, some preferred the Anderson shelter in the garden. Others just had trenches, a large hole dug about eight feet into the garden and some corrugated iron laid across the top of it.

Mrs Brazil had one of these trenches. It proved to be a godsend to her daughter Gladys and me, for we would often pretend to go to school but instead climb into the trench, staying there until it was time to come home. Of course we got found out in the end, but it was good while it lasted!

The poverty gradually got worse for everyone as so many sons were in the armed forces, and husbands too, so there was no actual weekly wage packet to look forward to.

But help was at hand. Down in the Lewes Road there was a pawnbrokers, name of Arthur Deakin. We all heard it called 'Uncles Ballses', followed by gales of laughter.

On Monday morning some of the ladies would casually walk down the cinder path on their way to the bus stop. Under their arm was usually a small parcel tied with a piece of rough string. No-one ever let on where they were off to, but of course everyone was in the same position, and the few shillings they could borrow on their hubby's best suit would do for meals the whole week.

On Fridays, when the pay came, those ladies would walk proudly down to Uncle Ballses to redeem what they had pawned. The same thing happened on the Monday: down the cinder path, then on to the Lewes Road.

MOULSECOOMB SENIOR GIRLS SCHOOL

When we children were eleven we left the junior school and transferred to the junior classes of the senior girls' school. The boys' school was next door.

I was put into Junior B. The teacher was Miss Pickett. She was a nice teacher but I did not enjoy being there any more than at the Infants and Juniors. When it came to what we called sums I could not begin to understand the more difficult curriculum. Tens and units were all right, pounds shillings and pence were also possible, but not fractions and decimals. I would burst into tears whenever this subject came up. I never did learn them, but it didn't hold me back.

Composition, English and spelling were my subjects. Nothing else interested me in the least.

Sometimes we could not go to school because the siren had sounded. It got to the stage where I would pray fervently for the air-raid warning to go off. Anything to avoid school. Games and sports were two pet hates of mine. I have never felt athletic. More in my line was to write poetry or to fabricate wild and wonderful stories.

Of course, the war and the chance of air-raids restricted our freedom very much. We could not go too far away from home, especially as the enemy planes were after Allen West, the munitions factory.

One day we were out in the playing fields, next to the school. Miss Hornby was trying to teach us to play hockey. Two planes hovered over the school. We were so frightened. Miss Hornby told us all to go to the shelter, but I ran into the bushes to retrieve my case, to put my plimsolls in. Suddenly, there was a terrible noise and I stood, with my whole body frozen with terror. The two planes had crashed into each other. There were bullets and pieces of shrapnel raining down and there I was, case in hand, rooted to the spot.

The next thing I knew, I was being whisked through the air by a teacher, who had missed me in the shelter and I was dumped onto the bench with all the other girls. All praise to that teacher. She certainly saved my life, though I did not appreciate the telling off I received for disobeying orders.

Then half the school was evacuated. I wanted to go with my friends, but Dad said that if it was our turn to die, we would all go together. What I couldn't understand was the fact that, as soon as all my school pals had been evacuated, we had hundreds of London children evacuated to Moulsecoomb. It didn't add up to me. Soon, however, I was to welcome the London evacuees, for they caused us only to have to attend school for half days. Let them all come! That was my motto.

BEREAVEMENT

When I was thirteen and creeping up through the B stream at school, my Dad took a turn for the worse and was rushed into what was then called the Municipal Hospital, at the top of Elm Grove. There, on August 20th 1942, he died, at the age of forty-six. It was a very traumatic time for us all. Poor Mum was out of her mind with worry, as Dad could never be insured because he had a progressive illness.

Mum was distraught because she had no idea where the money for the funeral would come from. In Barcombe Road lived a man called Mr Turner. He was some sort of representative from the British Legion. He was informed of the plight we were in and took matters into his own hands. He made sure that Dad had a soldier's burial. It was only right really. Dad had been so badly wounded in the 1914-18 War, and his galloping consumption was a direct result of that.

I remember having to stay at Mrs Akehurst's house while the funeral was in progress. Mum thought I was too young to be involved in it. I watched from the window as the cortege passed by. There was a Union Jack draped across Dad's coffin and very many wreaths. Dad's friends all attended and some stood to attention as the hearse passed and doffed their caps. I felt so proud of my Dad.

Not only did Mr Turner organize the funeral, he also began a battle for a decent pension for Mum. He succeeded, so Mum was able to forget the financial worries. We had enough to live a reasonable existence, not rich by any means, but able to eat and not get into debt.

Every Sunday I had to go over to Mrs Hazeldine's with a sixpence, to buy a huge bunch of flowers, which we took to the cemetery. The pity of it all was that we never had enough money to purchase Dad's grave, so we were unable to put up any sort of memorial to him. He was buried near to the soldiers' graves at the top of Bear Road and, to this day, I can still go to the spot where my Dad is buried, unmarked as it is.

Mum had all her good friends to rally round her, to lift her out of her grief. My brother and sister were grown up. I was the only one to be accounted for. So, thanks to the kind Mr Turner, we coped quite well.

That is how the folks of Moulsecoomb were, ever helpful, always concerned and forever rallying round in times of trouble.

LIFE GOES ON

We continued to play our games near to home. There were so few cars about then, so we could stretch a skipping rope across the width of Chailey Road and about ten of us could skip at the same time, with two more turning the rope.

Tin-can Tommy was another favourite game. We made a lot of noise, banging a can on the road and then running.

We had quite a few scares, as the bombers kept coming across the channel, looking for the factories. After all, they were only a few hundred yards away from Moulsecoomb.

The worst bit of the war, to my way of thinking, was the doodlebugs. So many of the darned things would come over our houses and we would wait for the silence, which meant it was on its way down. We were lucky, maybe a few slates rattled, but the doodles never actually fell on Moulsecoomb.

The Hikers Rest was a very busy place during the war years. Moulsecoomb men on leave, some on embarkation leave, along with their parents, enjoying a last drink together, at least for a couple of years, in some cases it would be forever.

So the place rang with songs from the army, sea shanties from the sailors. Mums cried into their stout and dads tried to keep a stiff upper lip. As the beer flowed, sorrows would be drowned a bit and some of the more raucous songs would start, but always within the limits of respectability, and laughter proved to be the best tonic of all.

The mums would all band together and sing the song that made them quite famous in their way:

*We are the Hikers Girls,
We are the Hikers Girls.
We know our manners,
We pay our tanners,
We are respected wherever we go.
When we're walking down Coldean Lane
Doors and windows open wide.
You can hear the neighbours shout,
Chuck those noisy beggars out -
We are the Hikers Girls.*

The laughter on the cinder path would ring out and I would jump out of bed to look out of the window to see what was going on. It was fun to live in Moulsecoomb.

I remember that we never thought of locking the doors or closing the windows if we were going out. No-one would have dreamt of entering. Honest as the day was long were our friends and neighbours.

No matter how long our mums had been up nor how early a start they had in the morning, they always did their firewatching duties. None of them seemed to suffer the stresses and strains of life that are common today. I don't think they had the time to even think about it!

LEAVING SCHOOL, GROWING UP

My fourteenth birthday couldn't come quickly enough for me and when it finally arrived I was overjoyed at leaving school. Some of the teachers I was a little sad to leave behind, they were so kind and understanding. Miss Moore was our singing teacher and to her correct pronunciation was of paramount importance.

So she devised a way that I have never forgotten. Whenever I have sung in public, Miss Moore is always with me. How many of my schoolmates will remember her singing: 'Nonny nonny nonny no,' and 'Nipperty pipperty nip'? We thought it stupid at the time but it has made a lot of sense to me since - the essence of a good teacher, I feel. We had a school song too. I believe Miss Moore and another teacher wrote it. We sang it with great pride and gusto.

The school colours were red, blue, green and yellow, to represent the four famous hills of Sussex, Chanctonbury, Cissbury, Hollingbury and Wolstonbury. This is the chorus:

*Of all the hills in England
The South Downs I love best.
And if among these Southern climbs
I must choose from out the rest,
Then it's Chanctonbury and Cissbury,
I love them more and more,
Then it's Hollingbury and Wolstonbury,
The hills that I adore.*

Yes, it seemed so strange that after all the years I had been at Moulsecomb School, as well as being elated, I was also a wee bit sad to leave behind such lovely teachers.

Once I had left school and started work at the Dentsply factory I soon found out where I had been best off!

The war still raged on. We had become used to being always on our guard and, being young, we youngsters had no intention of it ruining our lives.

Saint Francis Hall had been built at the bottom of Moulsecomb Way, which was in East Moulsecomb. Every Saturday night there was a dance held there. You had to be fourteen and over to get in. It was sixpence for the dance and threepence paid for a lovely crisp cheese roll and a glass of lemonade.

So, we would wash our hair and put pipe cleaners in, to curl it, spend our pocket money on a box of powder and a lipstick and look forward to a really good evening out.

A Mrs Richardson played the piano, Mr Hyder played the drums and a ginger-haired man played the clarinet. It was a really good sound. We always knew that the first dance would be a quickstep to the tune of Sweet Sue.

It wasn't long before we were all proficient dancers and if we were very lucky we even got to dance with a boy. Most of the people at the dance were our school friends. We used to have some really lovely times.

Of course, when you were fifteen, you were allowed to go to the Moulsecoomb Hall, near The Avenue, at South Moulsecoomb. Then you were really considered to be grown up. Even some Canadian soldiers used to go there, but we fifteen-year-olds never stood a chance.

Sometimes we were allowed to go to the Regent Ballroom in the town, but it cost a lot more, so Rosa and I stuck mainly to the local dances.

We could not afford to buy many new clothes. I had one black blouse, that Mum got me from somewhere, and every week I would spend sixpence on a different colour braid, patiently sewing it round the sleeves and along the pocket. Each week, with the different colour braid, I felt as if I had a new blouse on.

Growing up is always difficult, but it was doubly so, trying to do it with the war on, the shortages, the fears, the knowledge that there were so many of our friends and neighbours that we would never see again.

So, when at last peace was ours once again, did we celebrate in North Moulsecoomb? You can bet your sweet life we did. The bonfires burned brightly in the streets. Copious amounts of anything to drink were passed around and, in spite of all the hardships of rationing and the general deprivation, we ate, drank and were all very merry.

The Hiker's Rest was packed to the doors and the merrymaking went on through the night, until we all fell exhausted into our beds.

MOVING AWAY, LOOKING BACK

I met my future husband in the Hikers Rest. He was with a darts team from the country. It seemed a fitting place to meet and fall in love.

We were married at Falmer Church on April 1st 1950. Everyone rallied round with their meagre rations and spare clothing coupons, to help on our big day.

It was a white wedding, in a borrowed dress, but I was able to get enough clothing coupons to buy a nice outfit to wear afterwards.

As I walked out of 16 Chailey Road on my way to the church, the cinder path was lined with friends and neighbours, who had played such a huge role in my growing years. Some were rather touched and tearful. Others, like old Fan, called out, 'Any minute now, duck!'

Then, as I walked from the church with my husband, I looked at the Falmer pond and thought of all the tiddlers Rosa and I had caught there. I swear I saw two little girls who looked just like us, with slimy knees and wet dresses, holding on to their jam jars.

The wedding reception was a feast indeed, held at Falmer School Hall. Mrs MacDavitt had prepared it beautifully and all our friends and neighbours tucked in and wished us luck. I had left my beloved Moulsecoomb for the greener pastures of the country.

Mum moved away to live closer to the town. We had said goodbye to our old home.

My brother Ernie and I are the only two left of that family from Chailey Road. Mum lived to within a week of her ninety-sixth birthday. My beloved sister Gladys died when she was only fifty-seven.

Time has passed quickly. I am now a grandmother, but forever in my heart and mind will be North Moulsecoomb as it was then, with all the happy memories of lovely people. Mr and Mrs Sandall, Fan Johnson, Mrs Hazeldine, Mr Hyams and all the dear folks who lived there.

Memories of Moulsecoomb
Are forever in my mind,
Of loving, caring people
And friends I left behind.
Of playing in the sunshine
Where hopes and dreams were born,
Bird song in the cherry trees
Each day at early dawn.
Memories of laughter
And although we were poor,
Our wealth was in the humour
That dwelt behind each door.
Memories of Moulsecoomb
Will forever stay with me,
Moulsecoomb days
and Moulsecoomb ways -
A cherished memory.