

Peter Woodhams Life Story

Peter was born on 17th March 1928 at 4 Leslie Grove, Croydon, the first child of William Silas and Emily Woodhams.

He went to school at Oval Road School but missed a lot of his schooling due to illness. He was admitted to the Waddon Isolation Hospital (also known as Croydon Borough Fever Hospital) twice, once for Diphtheria and once for Scarlet Fever.

He also had two periods in Croydon General Hospital, once for an abscess under his arm and once for tonsillitis.

At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 Peter's mother left Croydon with Peter and his brothers and sisters and went to live with her sister Elsie and her husband, Harold, at their new house in Brockham, Surrey. Peter's father William was in the Auxilliary Fire Service and remained in Croydon. On the day of the 1939 Register, 29th September, William is with his family in Brockham.

During this time Peter was at school in Brockham, but only part time.

After a while it seems that the additional children in the house became too much for Elsie and Harold and Emily went back to Croydon, leaving Mary and Raymond with them. The official reason given was that Elsie's Aunt Emily, who had been living with her wanted to come back and live with them again.

Peter, Roger and John were then billeted in the neighbouring village of Leigh under the Evacuation Scheme. This must have been a difficult time as the boys were separated and moved from one billet to another. They went to local school in Leigh which apparently was overcrowded.

Peter left school when he was 14. Presumably this was as soon as he was 14, so in 1942. At around that time, "mother had us all back home".

While they were away a bomb had fallen in the garden of their house at 4 Leslie Grove and two people, who were in an Andersen shelter, were killed. Whilst the house was not destroyed it obviously suffered structural damage because the back end was shored up with heavy timber. So William and Emily needed alternative accommodation, which the council found for them on the Waddon estate in Denning Avenue.

Peter obviously felt the need to support the family because, without telling anybody, he found himself a job with Philpots, a firm who made ladders, on the Epsom Road. He started work on 3rd May 1942 at 4d an hour, that's less than 2p an hour! He worked a 50 hour week.

During his time in evacuation Peter got to know a farmer by the name of Wells and in the spring of 1943 Mr Wells enquired if Peter would be interested in going to work for him on Chantersluer Farm at Norwood Hill near Horley in Surrey. After consideration Peter decided he would and started work there in July 1943.

Chantersluer was a 100 acre tenant farm, in other words Mr Wells didn't own the farm he paid rent to the owner. He had a small herd of cows for milking, two horses and some pigs and chickens. The person who managed the horses, known as the carter, had left the farm, maybe to join the war effort. So Peter took his place and got of experience working with horses. But that wasn't really what he wanted, he wanted to work with tractors. He was still only 15 remember.

Note written by Jeff Woodhams based on handwritten notes by Peter.

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Then in the autumn of 1945, through a relative's connection, Peter got a job as a farm hand with Mr S Pepler at Stockholm Farm near Uffington in Berkshire. This was a much larger farm of hill and lowland areas and a combination of arable and dairy. The farm had 5 horses and a tractor but "I never got near the tractor!"

Peter's lodgings were in a thatched cottage in the nearby village of Wolstone. The cottage had no running water or drainage. "After a long summer's day working or getting up for early morning milking it was tough starting again."

After a winter in Berkshire Peter decided to move again and in April 1946 he arranged to lodge with the Levey's at Edenholme in Ghyll Road, Heathfield. He found work with the Richardsons at Bungehurst Farm on Newick Lane between Mayfield and Heathfield. Richardsons had a herd of 56 dairy cows and had their own milk delivery business in the local area.

Bungehurst was 3 miles from Edenholme and in the Rother valley and Peter cycled there and back every day. The winter of 1947 was particularly cold with significant amounts of snow and ice which made the journey up and down hill particularly hazardous. He had a couple of benefits though; comfortable accommodation and Mrs Richardson gave the farmhands a cooked breakfast every morning.

Some time in 1948 Peter moved to lodge with Mrs Antel at Broad House in Albion Street, Lewes. He found work at Rise Farm, Southover. The farm was part of the Iford herd of Dairy Shorthorn cows. It was a good herd but the working conditions were very hard.

He was probably complaining about the working conditions at Rise Farm in his lodgings and one of the other lodgers, who was on the WA Committee, persuaded him to move to Ditchling to work at Beards Place Farm

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