



**Arthur Harold Herbert Cordell's Life Story
2019**

As told to Annie Hamilton-Pike

The Amersham Museum have undertaken a project called *Reminiscences at Home* in 2019. A number of volunteers were matched with older people to listen to their life story. My match was with Arthur Harold Herbert Cordell. He lives in Chalfont St Peter, a town he has not left for all of his 85 years.

I interviewed him on 3 occasions of at *least* an hour each. Arthur has the most twinkly blue eyes and a marvellous chuckle. He is a little disabled by many physical problems but there is absolutely nothing wrong with his brain or memory and he proved to be a very good match!

What I intend to do in his story is to recount those interviews by date.

Interview 4th April 2019.

I visited Arthur at his home in Chalfont St Peter and established immediately his date of birth as 24th April 1934. His mum was Doris Eva Jarvis and his dad was Harold Herbert Cordell. Harold was a jobbing gardener and Arthur recalls him earning half a crown an hour and most of his customers he told me were 'toffs'. His father died in 1976. They had a pony between the years of 1942 and 1949 and, sadly, it got run over. Arthur remembers riding on Gold Hill Common and one day as it bent its head down to eat the grass, Arthur was tossed right over its head and went 'head over heels'.

His father was discharged from the army as he had 'flat feet and hammer toes', which, unfortunately, Arthur has inherited.

Arthur is the fourth generation of his family to keep pigeon's. He told me that one pigeon sold recently for £1m (not his unfortunately!). On one occasion, Arthur's pigeons were released in Thursco in Scotland and they took 2 days to fly home.

Due to his current physical disabilities, he is unable to keep them now and he misses them a great deal. In his hey-day he kept seventy racing pigeons. He moved to his current address in 1961.

Arthur is the eldest of 11 siblings. At Layters Close, he looked after his mum for 28 years. He left school and his first 'jobs' were helping the milkman and putting up advertising posters for the Broadway Cinema for pocket money. His first proper job was as a trainee engineer in Gerrards Cross. This was very dangerous as heating was by a free standing coke fire known as 'the Tortoise Shell'.

Thereafter he became a jobbing gardener (after National Service) and he worked for the actor, Cecil Parker, for five years. Arthur says he was 'a real gentleman'.

On the 9th September 1952 he was called up for National Service and eventually discharged on 25th August 1954. He became an aircraft mechanic in the RAF and, after training, he was posted overseas to Aden. He went there by boat from Liverpool and says he was very seasick even though the boat was still in the harbour! From there on it was as calm as a millpond through the Bay of Biscay and on to Suez and finally arrived in Aden.



Arthur in Aden

In his free time he played Canasta with his mates and was nicknamed 'the Count of Chalfont St Peter'.

He was one of 25 ground crew and had to keep 6 Valettas flying – this was a communications squadron.

Arthur does not regret doing National Service at all. Sometime after his return, he struck up a friendship with a girl but she moved away to Leicester and that was that. He then struck up a friendship with a lady called Pat but he said ‘half the trouble with me, I loved home too much’. ‘I loved my job more than her’. He worked as a gardener for Pat’s father and that is how he got to know her.

His headmaster taught him a saying – ‘Live life as simple as you can’ and that is just what Arthur has done. He has always been quite happy and contented with his life.

Going back to Cecil Parker, who had a wife and one daughter, Arthur worked for them three days a week.

Mr Parker played croquet and that was one of Arthur’s jobs to mark it out. Their maid prepared him lunch.

Arthur recalls one of Mr Parker’s more well know films which was called *The Right Admiral Crichton*, which, of course, Arthur saw. Mr Parker paid for Arthur’s driving lessons and he passed his test in 1961.



Cecil Parker

As for his social life, he went to the Cricketer's pub every Saturday with his mate. From the age of 17 years he rode an 'auto cycle' (probably a bicycle with a small engine). He said he was not supposed to drink beer at his age so he drank cider instead. On one occasion he 'came out of the pub and fell off my bike', no doubt due to the cider he had consumed! His mate was on the back resting his feet on footrests he had specially made for a pillion. 'Can't remember cycling down into Chalfont St Giles village'. He and his mate popped into the fish and chip shop on the way home and he told me they were 'great days'.

He went with his brother to a club to play in a whist drives in Chalfont St Peter and Gerrards Cross during the week and continued to look after his pigeons.

He left Cecil Parker in 1963 and round about that time he had an accident on his motorbike. "The damn dog ran out in front of me". He went over the top and lost a finger and was admitted to Mount Vernon Hospital where he stayed for three weeks because gangrene set-in.

The motorbike in question was a 175 Francis Barnett.

Arthur moved into Chalfont St Peter in 1961 with his Mum and Dad and siblings- Linda, Alan, Ian, Kathleen, Dennis and Bill. This was a Council house that his parents rented for £38.00 a fortnight. It had three bedrooms, which necessitated him and his brothers sharing one room and his sisters in another.



Arthur's Dad



Arthur's Mum

Arthur told me that he was saving to buy the house and it was valued at £26,000 in 1980 but, as his Mum and Dad had been council tenants since 1938, 50% was knocked off. At this stage only Arthur and Alan were at home and, of course, his Mum.

Arthur paid £5000 and got a mortgage of £8000 over ten years at 7% per annum.

He only ever earned about £10 an hour but his Mum worked as a cleaner up to the age of 70.

Arthur was very fond of his mother and always keeps her photograph in his wallet. When I asked him 'was that the main reason he didn't wish to marry' he replied 'yes- as I didn't really want to leave my Mum. None of his possible wives were a patch on his mother.'



Arthur and his Mum outside 18, Layers Close

His life was very happy and contented.

He was very close to his Father's mother, who died when Arthur was in the RAF, which made him very sad indeed. His Gran's open coffin was in the front room and he sneaked a look before the undertakers came.

His own mother died four days before Arthur's 70th birthday in hospital after suffering a fall on the 25th February 2004. She died aged 88 on the 21st April 2004.

He felt he had lost a few opportunities in life and first was giving up the chance to go to California. This was at the request of a lady he worked for in Dukeswood Drive as her gardener. She asked him to go with her to California to look after her garden there. On reflection, he told me, he was glad he didn't go.

The second was when he was at Chalfont Secondary Education Department at Bucks County Council. They offered him a better job to go round to the different schools to give advice on laying out the school grounds. Again he did not do this and told me he had no regrets.

So no opportunities lost at all!

He wishes to live to be 105! He told me his 'religion' is 'to do somebody a good turn - not a bad one'.

2nd Interview 18th April 2019.

His brother, Robert (always called Bob) emigrated to Canada on the 26th April 1956, which Arthur said, with a twinkle in his eye, 'perhaps to dodge National Service!'.

Arthur first went to see him in 1972 and the air fare was £64 return. He was there for three weeks and one of his first memories of that trip was a helicopter flight over Niagara Falls.

His brother lives in Ontario, 15 miles north of Toronto.

Robert has three children – two girls with his first wife and one boy with his second wife. This was the first of many trips to Canada by Arthur, who said he had ridden a 'shidoo' and travelled in a large trailer to eastern Canada. On this trip he saw moose, black bears and other extraordinary sights.

On one of his trips to Canada he flew on Freddy Laker's sky train.

His other trips have been to Switzerland, Belgium and France. On one of these occasions he crossed the Channel by hovercraft and drove a Morris Minor Traveller returning via Paris. He recalls his brother, Ian, driving on the wrong side of the road down the Champs Elysée-one or two words were exchanged!

He then reeled off the names and birth dates of his 11 siblings, without any hesitation whatsoever:-

Robert (Bob), 22nd January 1936,

Rose 8th March 1937

Bill 9th May 1940

Dennis 20th November 1942,

Frances 16th December 1945

Ron 1st October 1947

Kathleen 1st August 1950

Ian 21st February 1954

Alan 13th April 1956

Linda 12th July 1958.



Arthur (far right), Mum (turquoise jacket) and his 10 siblings

He tells me he is closest to his brother in Canada and his sister, Rose.

Arthur was 5 at the outbreak of World War 11 and recalls hearing the air raid siren. 'Cor blimey (his favourite phrase!), these were frightening times' so they slept downstairs, some under the kitchen table and some in a cupboard under the stairs. It was a three bedroomed council house with an outside toilet.

He told me that his father was a jobbing gardener and often (because his father couldn't write), Arthur forged his signature..... for what he didn't say!

His first gardening job was at the Chalfonts County Secondary Modern School and he started on June 4th, 1963. He really enjoyed his time there and his tasks included marking out the cricket pitch, erecting the high jump and putting in a running track. This latter task took three and a half days as it was the first time that this had been done. He rode to work by pushbike. The headmaster was

very obliging regarding tasks Arthur wanted to undertake to improve the grounds and pretty well gave him 'an open cheque'.



The Chalfonts County Secondary School

Ironically Arthur was not a very good sportsman and his main pastime was dominoes and going to watch football matches.

He told me he left because of 'time and motion' and was asked to work three days only at his existing school and two days at another school. He refused. He was very sad to leave 'I missed it so much'. Whilst at the school he planted a good number of trees, which were all marked with their names. He reckons discipline got so bad, the kids were climbing all the apple trees around so they cut the lot down. He took a personal interest in the school grounds and told me that there were just over 100 pupils when he started in 1963 and there are now over 2000.

3rd Interview 9th May 2019.

He tells me he is quite happy living on his own and his niece from Canada gives him a hand when she is over here. He tells me 'she mostly puts things back in the right place!' Her last visit here was for Arthur's 85th birthday (24th April) and five of the family went out to have fish and chips in Little Chalfont. Thereafter they went to a barbecue at his nephew's house.

I asked him what his favourite dinner was and he said 'a good Sunday roast'. Luckily he doesn't have a sweet tooth as he is a Type 2 diabetic.

A couple of years ago Arthur broke one of his toes which makes him move quite slowly. He gets pretty fed up when his family tells him to 'hurry up' when he just can't. He says it takes him three or four times as long to do things and feels like having 'a damn good swear' at them to 'get it out of my system'.

He never feels down and is always an optimist. He loves his garden, particularly, the lilac, laburnum and apple trees. He is a real nature lover.



Arthur's Garden

He used to be a keen vegetable grower on his allotment – runner beans (which he tells me should ideally facing south west and need a lot of water), lovely Webs Wonder lettuce, pointed cabbage, beetroot, rhubarb, spinach, potatoes and tomatoes. Amongst the vegetables, were beautiful dahlias. He always got his rotted horse mulch from Seer Green.

He really does miss going to his allotment.

At his school in Chalfont St Peter (Infants) the children were segregated into Church of England and Catholics. They had a coke burner in the classroom to keep them warm.

At eleven years old there was again segregation but this time girls with girls and boys with boys.

He recalls air raid shelters outside his school, which were very dark but never used for real 'Thank God'. He reckons he saw a dog fight in the air. There were searchlights and anti-aircraft guns in Chalfont St. Peter.



One of Arthur's schools today

He was taught reading, writing and arithmetic and commented 'Computers nowadays don't test your brain box you know'. Two pupils shared a desk.

He went to the Gospel Hall on a Sunday with his siblings. When he was seven years old, he spent a lot of time at his Gran's and rode his pony there.

There were no flush toilets in his primary school so the buckets were emptied onto the School allotments. 'Never saw celery grow so fast'.

His father kept chickens and rabbits and he told me 'Can't beat a rabbit stew – cor blimey – lovely'. Dad always had a stew on the go and 'it looked like a large stock cube'. Also chucked into this soup were scrag-ends of mutton and pearl barley. It bubbled away for days and once a week Arthur had to clean out the saucepan. Not an easy job.

His father worked for a chap called Mr Lakeman, who kept chickens and often gave Arthur an egg, which he put in his pocket. Most times he forgot, and it smashed making an awful mess.

He said his school days were very happy and recalls that he was terrible at PE – even in the RAF, when he was let off as he was so bad!

He was quite good at one school and was put up a class.

His family had evacuees during the War and had to be 'top and tailed in bed'. Eleven people lived in the two family's bedroom house during the War. The bath had to double as a table, by putting a piece of wood on the top.

Arthur left school in 1949 at fifteen years old. He recalls being hopeless at football and, as the family could not afford football boots, these were bought second-hand and his father fixed studs on the bottom. His father also mended all his siblings' shoes.

He told me that his neighbour delivered his sister, Kathleen, at home and 'all of us bar one was born at home too.' That was my youngest brother, Alan (14th April 1956).

I asked him if his father was present at the births and Arthur told me 'No, he was probably down at the pub'.

Mum worked until she was 70 as a cleaner but didn't work when the kids were young. She was 43 when she had Linda and 'wore herself out'.

He remembers his parents arguing but he did think that they were happy. When his father died in 1976, Arthur said to his mother 'Don't let me get in the way of another man' and she replied saying 'One man's enough for me'.

My mother Doris and was 17 when she married my father who was 23 and, apparently, they cycled to get married in Amersham Registry Office.



Arthur at Amersham Museum 2019

POSTSCRIPT

I visited Arthur on six occasions in all, and on the last one, I drove him around Chalfont St Peter to visit all the places that meant so much to him...his old homes, his schools and his place of work at Chalfont Community School. He loved it as it brought back so many happy memories. One place he wanted me to see was his parents grave but unfortunately the gates were locked. It was just too far for him to walk through the pedestrian gate. However, he does visit it on a weekly basis on his electric mobility scooter. He uses this regularly to go shopping, visit the doctors and of course, to see the sights of his beloved Chalfont St Peter.

It was a privilege and a real laugh to listen to Arthur. He never moans about his 'lot', despite all the physical problems he has, and likes nothing better than pottering in his garden as best he can

