

# Vera Rose



*18 years old, and ready to face the world*



*1929 - 18 years earlier*

I was born, Vera Mary, on May Day, 1 May 1929, at St George's Hospital, Hyde Park Corner. My parents, Elsie Edith and William (Bill) Cockram, lived in Chelsea. That was at the start of the Great Depression in the UK, and for a while my Dad, who was a plumber, had no work and earnt a little money sweeping the streets. Mum did cleaning and then worked as a waitress. My sister, Elizabeth (Betty), was born almost exactly two years later on 2 May 1931. I went to a local nursery

school with Betty until I was 4 years old, and then to St Luke's Church of England School in Markham Street.



*Betty (on left), age 2, and me, age 4*

Because Mum always had to go to work, we spent a lot of time with her mother, our Nan, who lived in the same block of flats. I remember going to her from school at lunchtimes, and on the way buying sweets from a farthing, ha'p'ny or penny tray. Nan had knocked her leg badly in an accident at home during the time of World War I, and had two big ulcers on it – you could

see through to the bone. She was a very independent woman and, instead of asking for help in carrying the dishes to the kitchen, she would put some of them in an apron tied around her waist and then put the end of the apron in her mouth. Her husband, our grandfather, had suffered bullet wounds in the bottom of the spine during the War. He was always in great pain, which the medication in those days could not control, and he eventually jumped into the Thames and drowned.

Our grandfather on my Dad's side was the head fishmonger at Harrod's.

I can remember the games we used to play when we were children, simple games, so different from the things the children play with today. There was whip and top, marbles, skipping and tin tan tommy. Tin tan tommy involved one of the children throwing a tin down the road, then the rest of us hid while the tin was recovered, and the person with the tin then had to find us. We played in the yards between the blocks of flats,

but there was also a park nearby in St Luke's churchyard with swings and a roundabout.

We had some family holidays in the 1930s in Broadstairs, when we all came back to London as brown as a berry.



*On the beach at Broadstairs, age 5*

Shortly after my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1939 the War started, and I was evacuated to Addlestone in Surrey. I can still remember setting off from London with a little label for my name, a little bag and a gas mask. There were lots of children on the train, and when we arrived at

Addlestone, one of the adults waiting for us said, 'I'll take this person', looking at me. She was a lovely lady, more like a Mum to me, and I called her and her husband Auntie and Uncle. I remember that she got me off sugar in my hot drinks. Sugar was in short supply, and she asked, 'Do you want sugar in your tea and coffee or in your cake?' I said, 'Cake!' While I was staying with them, my Auntie let me buy a bike with the pocket money I had saved. It cost two pounds ten shillings (£2.50 in today's money). My Mum wasn't very pleased about that.

I remember that one of the other evacuees hated being in Addlestone, and walked all the way back to London. At the outbreak of War, and before going into the Army, Dad worked in a demolition squad, bringing down bombed-out buildings and recovering bodies. He then went off into the Army until the end of the War. But Mum also moved to Addlestone with my sister, Betty, sometime after I did. I don't know why, but Betty always seemed to be the apple of my mother's eye, and I stayed with my Auntie and Uncle until the end of the

War. My sister was much bigger than me; she was huge, she ate lots of food. I was always very fussy about what I ate; I still am. Betty died in 2016.

While I was in Addlestone, I was confirmed at St Paul's Church in School Lane when I was 13.



*St Paul's Church, Addlestone*

Another of my particular memories of my years in Addlestone is of being with some friends who said they were going scrumping. I had been used to buying fruit and vegetables off a barrow in the street in London, and did not know what scrumping was. My friends told me that it was picking apples off the ground, but when we got to the orchard there weren't many on the ground.

As I was the smallest, they lifted me up into the tree to pick some. But a man came along. 'What are you doing?' 'Looking for windfalls.' 'Well you won't find many windfalls up there!'

While living in Addlestone, I moved to a school in Chertsey, and would get the train there each day. Sometimes, at weekends, Mum took Betty and me to Virginia Water for tea.

I hated school, perhaps because I had to change schools so many times, but also because the teachers kept telling me that my sister was better than I was. I was only good at knitting and sewing, but I've always felt that you don't need exams to do well, you just need a lot of common sense. I left school as soon as I could, when I was 14 years old, and got a job in the post room of a company which had taken over a large, old house in Ottershaw when the war started. I moved on to work in the filing room, and then got a transfer with the same company to their offices in Westminster, by which time the War had ended and I was able to return to live with



Mum and Dad in Chelsea. Dad came home a few months after I had moved to work in Westminster, and in 1946 my brother, David, was born! I was most disgusted. But I always got on very well with him. He emigrated to live in Australia about 12 years ago to join his daughter. His son still lives in the UK, and David comes back to England every two years or so. My parents carried on living in Chelsea for the rest of their lives in a flat belonging to the Samuel Lewis Trust. Dad died when he was 75 years old, but Mum was 95 years old when she died in 2004.



*The Samuel Lewis Trust, Chelsea*

I can still picture our flat in Chelsea. It was on the fifth floor, the top floor (no lift!) It had two bedrooms. There was a bath in the kitchen, with a table top that was pulled down over it when the bath was not being used. We had an indoor lavatory: the toilet seat had to be held down – when you stood up the toilet flushed automatically. We had a big copper to heat the water, and then we had to fill the bath with buckets of water from it. Hot water was precious, so Betty and I would have our baths first, then Mum and finally Dad would in turn get into the same pool of water. By the time Betty and I were teenagers, we would go to the local public baths for our wash. We had open coal fires, which we would all sit around and get burnt on one side. None of the flat's windows fitted very well, and in the winter the windows would ice up on the inside.

When I was 18, I changed jobs to work with Wolseley Motors in Manor Street, Chelsea, and that is where I met my husband, Arthur Fairhead, one of the mechanics. We were engaged when I was 19, and married at St Luke's Church, Sidney Street in Chelsea,

on 25 March 1950 when I was not quite 21 – so different from today, when it is very unusual indeed for girls to get married so young.



*St Luke's Church, Chelsea*

My Mum made all the dresses for me and my bridesmaids, and the outfits for the page boys. In those post-war years, it was impossible to get ingredients for

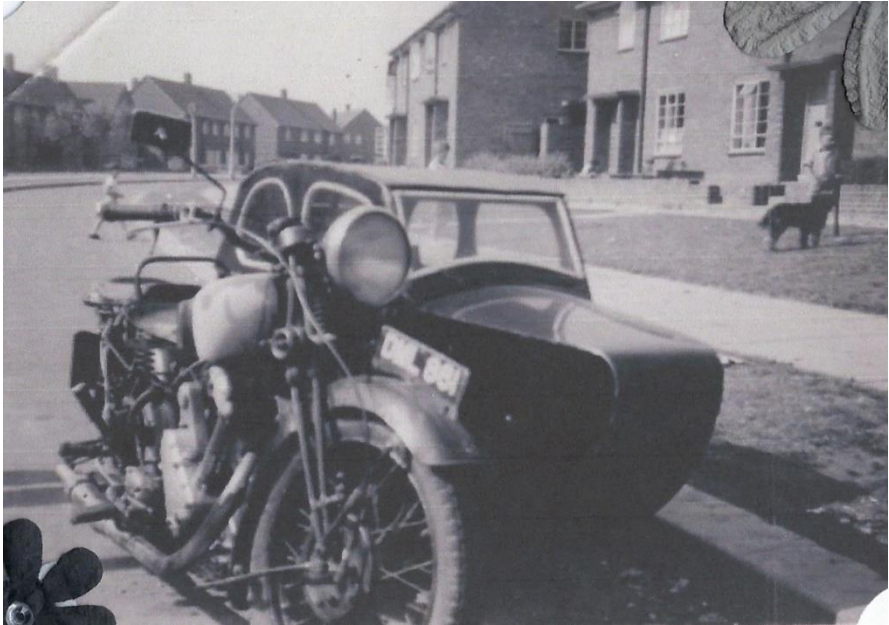
a wedding cake, so my uncle sent everything from America and a friend made it for us. And just to finish the wedding story, I have a photograph of us two honeymooners on the beach in Clacton.



*The new Mr and Mrs Fairhead on our honeymoon.  
Someone else's dog gate-crashed the photograph.*

Arthur had a motor bike and sidecar in those days, and I remember an occasion, in 1949 I think, before we were married, when we broke down on the way to Sheringham in Norfolk. It cost us three days of our holiday while Arthur waited for the spare parts to repair his motor bike. It is interesting to note that we wore

goggles in those days, but not crash helmets. When the children were born a few years later, they used to travel in the sidecar while I rode pillion behind Arthur.



*In Clapham, about 1952*

We started our married life in Clapham. Arthur's Mum had a big flat there, large enough to house Arthur and his three brothers, the brothers having been bombed out of their homes in Balham. As the brothers had each in turn got married, Arthur's Mum was left, the only one in the flat, and she was able to let us have a large room which served both as our bedroom and living room.

Like all newly-weds then, we had very little money. Whereas young couples nowadays expect to start with everything, I think all we could afford were 6 knives, forks and spoons! We certainly couldn't afford curtains, and had to hang army blankets up at the windows. We then moved to a brand-new council flat in Wandsworth. We had two daughters, Janet, who was born on 11 January 1951, and Lynda, born on 18 May 1953. One of our neighbours, living in the flat beneath ours, was Dennis Waterman, who became famous as an actor in television series like Minder and The Sweeney. He was born in 1948, so was just a little older than Janet. He was the youngest of nine children. One of his brothers, Peter, was a boxer who used to come into our flat to listen to boxing commentaries on the radio. I used to go to barn dances with his sister, Norma. Dennis was married to the actress, Rula Lenska, from 1987 to 1998, and it was during this time that Rula, together with one of Dennis's sisters, Joy, took me for tea in Covent Garden. We also went to his home in Wooburn Green.

While still living in Wandsworth, and when the children were old enough to go to school, I had a part-time job with John Lewis in Chelsea. I had to walk all the way there a few times when there was a bus strike. John Lewis had their clearings office there, so we would label stock up and price it and send it down to the packing area, where it would be sent off to all the John Lewis shops – in Reading, Southampton and other places, including of course Peter Jones in Sloane Square.

In due course, Arthur went into business on his own, repairing and selling motor cars, and after 3 years we were able to buy our own house, a terraced house in Mitcham. Arthur was musical from an early age – he won a prize for the accordion when he was nine and living in Balham. He loved playing the piano, the accordion, the mouth organ, and an organ which he won in a prize drawer at the Royal Festival Hall. In fact, he loved playing anything he could get his hands on, from a comb and paper upwards. I used to work for Arthur in his business, collecting spares, delivering cars, and doing all the office work – typing invoices and

preparing statements. Arthur asked me to deliver an MG once. 'I can't drive that.' I got no sympathy: 'If you can drive, you can drive anything.' We called the business 'Lynette Autos', after Lynda and Janet.

We lived in Mitcham for about 13 years, before moving to Hayling Island. Years later, we went back to the site of his old business, and it was derelict. Arthur had sold the business when he had become disabled. He had run it for 25 years, and sold it to a fitter whom he had trained from the age of 16. That man had managed the business for another 25 years, but had then had to leave it because of his ill health, and had not been able to find a buyer. I cried my eyes out when I saw the ruins.

Arthur loved sailing and had a boat on Hayling Island. His first one leaked like a sieve – there was more water inside than out – but in due course he bought a brand-new one. We learnt afterwards that Dick Emery had also been interested in buying that boat, but Arthur had put his bid in first. Sailing was not my idea of fun – I



preferred to have two feet on the ground – and I only went with Arthur to get the boat launched, or because he needed someone to drop the anchor or haul it in again. Once I missed the anchorage, and Arthur had to go round in a circle so that I could try to drop the anchor again. He would sail out to Nab Tower in The Solent, but I never went out to sea. We kept our caravan on Hayling Island as well, and in 1976 bought a bungalow on the Island. While we were living there, I worked at Sperry Vickers, which supplied car parts from their factory in Havant. Also, while I was there, I played some football. This is me in a Boys v Girls match in 1980 – the Girls had to win!



*Where's the ball?*

By the early 1980s, Arthur had become unwell, and in 1985 we moved to Aylesbury. Sadly, Arthur died in 1986 at the age of 62, after a 5-year fight with cancer.

1973 was a busy (and expensive) year for us: Lynda got married on 14 July and then Janet on 22 September. I think I must have inherited my Mum's dress-making skills, because I made six bridesmaids dresses in 3 months for the two weddings. Lynda lives in Aylesbury and has a son, Lee, and a daughter, Nicola. She still works, but manages to visit me here in Amersham every Friday and does my hair. She is, in fact, a hairdresser, having trained at John Lewis in Oxford Street, where she won the John Lewis Hairdressing Competition in 1973, the year she got married. Janet lives in Holland, and has a son, Stuart. She comes back to England three times a year, which is lovely now that I cannot drive to Holland as I used to, to visit her. Now that I am 90, it is perhaps not surprising that the number of my descendants has grown: Lee and his partner, Emma, have two children, Lewis and Mason; Nicola has three daughters, Kyarna,

Anaisha and Allanya; and Stuart has a step-daughter, Evi. So, in summary, I have two children, three grandchildren, and five great grandchildren. And I must not forget my stepson, Brian and his wife, Yvonne, who have three children and four grandchildren, and they of course are my step-grandchildren and step-great grandchildren. One of Brian's daughters lives in New Zealand, and has a wonderful life there. And one of Lynda's grand-daughters is a keen footballer – following in Great Grandma's footsteps!.

Lynda was the sporty daughter. She went on several school skiing trips to Austria, getting a bronze medal on the first and a silver on the second. She would probably have got her gold on her third trip, but unfortunately she became ill and had to return home. She also enjoyed swimming. Janet on the other hand was mad on dancing. I used to go to tap and ballet classes with her. Janet went on to train at the Corona Stage School, Hammersmith, leaving when she was 16 to join a dance centre in London, where she was offered various dancing contracts. These took her to

theatres in places like Ipswich, Northampton and Folkestone, and a highlight was dancing in the Danny La Rue show at the London Palladium. She also danced in Germany and Mexico, and it was in Mexico that she met her future husband, a Dutchman named Wim, a steel drummer. Janet came home to London, leaving Wim in Mexico. She cried every night. I said to her, 'If he loves you, he will come to London to find you.' And he did. He is a wonderful husband and son-in-law. Holland is a lovely country, but the language is so difficult. Even so, Janet has taught herself Dutch. And one other little detail I must include: Wim's cousin's daughter is the coach for the Dutch national women's football team, which played in the Women's World Cup in France in the summer of 2019.

Lynda's husband, Brian, golf-mad, and again a wonderful son-in-law, died at age 54, another victim of cancer.

As I have said, I used to drive to Holland to stay with Janet, and one particular memory while I was there is of

visiting Anne Frank's House in Amsterdam. We went there before the house was modernised, and we had to climb a really eerie, creaky old staircase to see where Anne had actually hidden. It was very emotional. Nowadays, the staircase is too dangerous to climb, and you can only see it through a glass screen. There is not the same atmosphere as there was when you could climb the stairs.

I loved my dancing, and over the years I have done most things – tap, ballet, ballroom, sequence dancing, square dancing, line dancing. My earliest memory of dancing – I must have been about nine years old – is of wearing white trousers and a page boy's hat which my Mum had made for me and learning tap dancing.



*The start of my life of dancing*

I have memories of a number of other occasions. One was taking part in a charity function at the Rudolph Steiner Theatre in Park Street, just north of Baker Street in London.



*The Rudolph Steiner Theatre*





*Me on stage (third from right) at the Rudolph Steiner Theatre, with part of the tap-dancing troupe, 'All Change for Happiness'. I was about 25 years old; all the other girls were teenagers under my support and guidance. Dennis Waterman's sister, Norma, is on the extreme left.*



*Another photograph of me on stage at the Rudolph Steiner Theatre.*

Another memory was after I had married Arthur: on our first wedding anniversary in 1951, we danced to Joe Loss and his Orchestra at Earls Court or Olympia, I'm

not sure which. I was wearing a dress I had made myself.



*Arthur and me, dancing to Joe Loss*

And then there was the time I drove a mini-bus with 12 dancers to a square dance in Holland in 1996 or 1997,

where one of our group was to be the caller. We left on a Friday, and I drove down to Dover and then from Calais, across Belgium and into Holland. As we drove back on the Sunday, the rest of the group sang, 'For she's a jolly good fellow'.



*Somewhere between London and Holland*

There was a time when I was very much involved with a dance troupe called 'All Change for Happiness'. One of

Dennis Waterman's sisters was in the troupe, and I did the make-up for the young girls. I did a lot of dress-making then, too – as many as 30 outfits on one occasion.

I think I have enjoyed square dancing most of all: you make lots of friends, and at big dances people come from all over the place. I love the outfits, too: the ladies have big petticoats underneath and flared skirts, the men coloured shirts to match their ladies' outfits. When my club visited another club, we would all dress in our club colours. Square dancing has about 40 moves, and as you learn the different calls you go through the grades – mainstream dancing, plus dancing, A1 and A2 levels and finally C level. When you graduate, you get a badge, and then you can go to a square dance anywhere.

In my bedroom at The Croft Care Home where I now live, I've got two frames on the wall with badges of all the clubs I have danced at.

Line dancing is different from square dancing in that you don't need a partner. I learned line dancing with Lynda. I'm very proud of her; she is brilliant at it now. She recently went away for the weekend with her line dancing club, and stayed at a hotel in Southsea that I had stayed in when I was doing my square dancing.

Arthur and I used to do ballroom dancing together, and as I have said I had been very fond of American square dancing. After Arthur's death, I discovered a square-dancing club in Wendover. One of the men there asked me to dance with him, and eventually asked me to marry him. We were in Germany when Victor (Vic) Rose and I became engaged on September 22 1989, a date which was also my daughter's wedding anniversary. Arthur's best friend, Charles, had said to me when Arthur died, 'If you ever get married again. I will give you away'. And so he did, when I married Vic on January 13 1990. We went to Florida for our honeymoon. Vic's son, Brian, worked for British Airways and paid for our trip, which was wonderful. While we were there, we travelled around square

dancing. We even drove 90 miles so that I could buy a new square-dancing outfit. Back in England, we did a lot together, going to many weekend dances, and in fact we danced almost seven nights a week. Square dancing also took us to New York in 1995 - we flew there on Concorde! Some dancing friends of ours had moved to New York, leaving their new address and phone number with us and inviting any of the dancers here in England to stay with them. Vic and I were the only ones to take up the invitation, but while there we danced with our friends at a number of different clubs. We also managed to fit in a coach trip to Niagara Falls.

Sadly, I lost Vic, too, when he passed away in 2002.

To fly on Concorde was one of my life's ambitions. The other two, which I have also achieved, were to go in a stretch limo to Ascot - in 2004, to celebrate my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday - and to drive a fast car around a race track. I did that at Thruxton Circuit in Hampshire, also in 2004. I drove three laps around the track with a co-driver beside me, and hit 100 mph down the straight. I loved

the chicanes. The co-driver gave me scores for the various skills I had to demonstrate – 74% for going around the bends and cornering, 84% for driving, more scores for approaching the bends, steering, gear change, braking and so on. After my test, the co-driver drove me for another two laps with two of my friends in the back; they were terrified, they screamed all the way around.

I managed to carry on leading a fairly active life until 2012, when I had a fall and I couldn't dance, couldn't do much at all. In the summer of 2018 I was very ill, and things reached a point where it seemed best for me to go into a care home. I moved into Mandeville Grange in Aylesbury in July, but the Social Services Department said I could not stay there, so I came to The Croft in Amersham in November. I am very happy being here, I don't regret moving here at all. My only problem is that I like to be busy, I'm not one for sitting about, my body does not really let me. So, at the weekends when they seem to be a bit short of staff, I clear the tables in the dining room after breakfast and fold the serviettes. I



enjoy it; it is something for me to do. I do a little bit of gardening, too, but my legs are letting me down now, so I may not be able to do that for much longer. Some friends came to visit yesterday. We went out and did a little bit of shopping at the Tuesday market in Amersham on the Hill, and I bought all the birthday cards I will need for the next year from one of the stallholders. We had a lovely lunch at The Boot and Slipper. I don't yet know Amersham very well, but I have memories a few years ago of going to the wedding of my chiropodist at the time in St Mary's Church in Old Amersham, and of seeing the Market Hall sticking out into the road.

It's now January 2020, and we have had a good Christmas and New Year at The Croft. In December, I went with a party to see the pantomime, 'Cinderella', at The Elgiva in Chesham. The actor playing Bottom was sick, and his understudy did not know the lines, so he had to read from a script all the time. Then two girls and two young men, who perform as a group called Tickled Pink, came to The Croft to perform 'Beauty and

the Beast'. It was absolutely brilliant, first class. I couldn't fault them at all – and I am very critical, I really am! And finally, we went to The Elgiva again to see '42<sup>nd</sup> Street'. My feet were going all the time!

So, to round off my story, here's a recent photograph of me at The Croft. David Cash, a volunteer from Amersham Museum, who has helped me bring my story together, pressed me for one to complete it. I had a final session with David in March 2020. It was a beautiful spring day. I could see rooks beginning to build their nests in the trees across the road, and I'm hoping that as the weather gets warmer, I will be able to potter around again in the garden, looking after some of the planters and troughs. The coronavirus pandemic was causing a lot of concern, and the staff that morning were busy spraying and wiping everything with anti-bacterial cleaners. I hoped that all the steps they were taking would be effective! I hope my family will enjoy reading my story, and that perhaps visitors to the Museum in the years to come will be fascinated to have an insight into the life of someone whose years

spanned a large part of the last century, a life that is different in so many ways from the ones that children born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will experience.

