Clifford Rex Wilkinson – Memories of Newbold Heath

Clifford Rex Wilkinson – always known as Rex, was born on 14th November 1933 to Margaret Eleanor and Harold Wilkinson.

The family lived at Newbold Heath and Rex had 2 older brothers, Len and Derek. Prior to her marriage, his mother Eleanor lived at Merrylees Road, Newbold Heath. His father moved from Bretby, Derbyshire where his father was a miner. During World War I Rex's father, Harold, was in the Royal Navy and the family lived in lodgings in Portsmouth. Rex thinks that Len, his eldest brother, was born there.

His father, Harold, always said the Lord looked after him during one time in the navy. He was out in the Middle East area and this chap didn't want to come back home so they swapped and Harold boarded a ship to come home. The ship he would have been on, continued further and was sunk with all lives lost. If he hadn't swapped, he would have been drowned, so he felt the Lord looked after him.

When they came home after World War I Rex's father bought some land at Newbold Heath and had their 3-bedroom house built to his specifications. This house was the first house along the Merrylees Road as you came to Newbold Heath. Rex was born there but his older brother Derek was born at his Grandma's house. Rex says they enjoyed a good life, his parents looked after them and they were well fed – but had no money! But nobody had then. Rex's father built up a coal business with his brother Len. Then in 1947, after the Second World War he set up and built the garage.

Rex's Mum's family lived at Newbold Heath. His Grandma and Aunt Bertha, who was his Mum's sister, lived together. Grandma was bedridden for years and her sister lived with her, but everyone helped out, as there were no 'carers' in those days. There were 13 altogether in his Mum's family but they did not all live at Newbold Heath after they left home. His father had two sisters Eileen and Mary.

His mum always 'kept a good table'. Breakfast would be bacon fat with HP sauce and bread. His Dad and Uncle Cis (Coy) reared pigs. Uncle Cis lived down the Bagworth Road in the row of houses there. They had one pig each, kept in a sty at the bottom of his garden. Uncle Cis looked after the pigs and Harold paid him for the feed. When one of the pigs was killed, they would split the meat between them. 'Home cured bacon was not like it is now, the bacon fat was quite different as the pigs were fed differently. They would eat all the scraps, potato peelings and everything left over from the kitchen – the pigs had it'. They would always have meat for Sunday dinner and then his mum would fry up any left overs on Monday for bubble and squeak.

Monday was always a wash day. This was the only day in the week when they went in the front room, because the washing was drying in the other room. Washing was done with a dolly tub and a copper kept in the wash house. Monday was also a bath day. The copper was quite big and when the washing was done Rex's mum would put fresh water on to heat, then take the fire out and wash the children. This was before water was laid on at the Heath. When water was laid on them they had a bath put in the wash house. They had a big (possibly 500 gallon) water tank over the toilet/coal house. There was also a tank at the car garage. Some people had wells or big sinks to save water. Rex's family had a pump for drinking water. When the house was built, they had a well for the pump but it would run dry – so they dug it out deeper. They never ran out of water after that. The pump

water was nice to drink, it was much better water. At times, they used to supply water for the rest of the Heath. People would come with buckets when the weather was really dry. It used to be shared. There used to be a big water tank at Bagworth and the pressure from that tank pushed the water down to Newbold.

Subsidence from mining

When the Coal Board subsidence came, that ruined the water supply from the pump. The ground dropped and it cracked everything. So, they took the water pipe out and filled it in and water was laid on for them on the Heath. Houses had to be re-built or propped up. We would say "what happened in the night?" – you would hear the firing (from the mine shaft) and there would be a noise, the house would move and the piano would go across the room!' Rex's family house had a 3" lean to it. They were compensated for that by the Coal Board, but the house was not rebuilt. Some houses were rebuilt but they would often make the floors level but the ceilings would still lean. The garage was rebuilt twice. When the garage was built originally it was level right the way through. The first time they rebuilt it they needed 2 steps down at the back to get in the back door – it had dropped that much, but it was level at the front. The next time they rebuilt it, it went the other way – you got 2 big steps in at the back. 'The Bagworth Road, up the Heath there is a bend, and from there on your bike you could cruise down to the brook. But then after the subsidence – you couldn't – the road went all shapes. This affected the Heath and down as far as the Dragon Pub where they hit a big fault and couldn't go any further. That's what stopped them at the Dragon'

Earliest Memory – well, a memory told!

'Mam told us that one day she was looking for me – and this chap, one of the neighbours, I don't know who it was – came in with me in his arms – he said - I've just found him – is this your lad? She said Yes! I've just found him down the road – he's fell – and knocked himself out. And what I'd done – didn't realise till afterwards – we'd got the gate – and my Dad thought he'd fixed us in. We'd got the gate and I'd got under it! I can remember her telling me – but I can't remember it! Nobody knew what happened - but he brought me up!'

'I used to come to the Ladies Guild – that was going then – at the Methodist Church – in the pushchair. I tell people I am the longest attending there as I came in my pushchair! My Mum bought me every Wednesday – Wednesday afternoon.' They would walk down together with other ladies from the Heath.

The House

The house was a 3-bed detached house with a nice garden. The house was heated with a coal fire with a fireplace in each downstairs room and little fireplaces in the bedrooms which were only lit if someone was poorly. Whoever got up first would light the fire – usually Rex's Dad. Len had a bedroom and Derek and Rex shared. When Len got married the bedroom was made into a bathroom. There was an outside toilet. It was a water toilet, not a pan, so we'd go out the back door – and fill a bucket from the pump and put it down the toilet to flush it. We used rainwater for washing. It was collected in a big tank on top of the coalhouse and toilet. The full size of the building was a tank. He put a tank in the garage - He piped it inside the garage and put a big tank on the wall - in there which was a bit lower than the outside tank.' Other people had water butts to catch the water. The pump

would run out – this was the pump on the Merrylees Road. The pump at their house never ran out because they had dug it so deep. 'How they did it I don't know without the equipment.'

The Garden

His Dad bought 2 plots of land so they had a good garden. They grew mainly veg and had a lawn. They used to grow potatoes and kidney beans.

'When the subsidence happened Connie (Statham's) sewer next door cracked and leaked into our garden. We got some massive stuff. He used to grow sweet peas – the stalks were really long. It did the garden good and kept it moist. We had apple trees and plum trees across the road and blackberries in the hedge. Elijah Cave, who was a preacher, used to run the sewerage farm down Thornton – the sewerage all went to Thornton. This year, they were trying to get rid of some of the stuff, so Elijah said to Dad can you make use of it for the garden? He had 2 lorry loads. The lorry came alongside the hedge and put this stuff over the hedge. The tomatoes that came up were huge!' (they just came up from the sewerage) They had brambly apples – Rex fell off the ladder picking them once. They carefully stored them and they would last all winter. They would be stored under the bed in a wooden trough. 'Mam made jam but not with her own fruit. I think she made rhubarb jam.'

The woodyard

'The woodyard was initially a tip where they tipped the ash from fires – they had ash from the pit where they heated the water and the ash was used for surfacing. Then Finney's took it over. Dad had lorries and Dad transported the bandsaw for Finney's. The car park at church (the Methodist church) was done like this – coal dust and ash.'

Childhood and Health

'We used to all go to play down Bates' field – Gerald Bates had Chater House and there was a big field in front of the house and they used to allow us to go down there and play. We could be down there most of the day – take a bottle of water. We used to go further down and play by the brook. It was mainly in the field though. There was me and Derek and Lynda (Bell) and Dorothy (Statham), Dulcie (Coy) and others. Charles Barsby was one of the older ones. My Grandma was a Barsby.'

Rex said they played ball and hide and seek. Rex had Dinky toys and he did lots of Meccano.

'I was in bed for 6 weeks in bed with rheumatism. I didn't get out of bed. I didn't get the fever but it was rheumatism. The doctor treated me and stopped it getting to rheumatic fever. My Dad bought this second-hand big box of Meccano. We had a big board on the bed and I got it early (early Christmas present) because I was poorly. Couldn't get out of bed. I got up this morning and said to Mam – what's up with my feet? – it was like putting them on a balloon when I put them down'

The Doctor came regularly when Rex was ill. He gave him medicine and then you were given a tonic to take when you were getting better – 'it tasted horrible.'

'If you were unwell the doctor would come to the house. The nurse came first – she called the doctor – but you had to pay then. You paid each week for the nurse to come – it was only a few pence. The doctor came from Desford. He had a big house there with the surgery in a room in his

house – it was down the road on the left at the roundabout and on the left there. Then he also came one or two days a week to Main Street to hold a surgery. You went and waited. There were no appointments. You just sat and waited.'

Sunday

Sunday was always church. Rex's Dad would walk down with them in the morning as he was a teacher in the Sunday school. Then they would walk back and his Mum would have dinner ready for them. Then they would go to Junior church in the afternoon – this was a special service for younger people. The preachers used to come in a taxi to take this. Then they would walk back again for tea. People used to take it in turns to give the preacher his tea. Wilf Bills and others would take the preachers home and give them their tea. Then they would all go down again at 6 o'clock for the evening service. His Mum and Dad went to the evening service and Rex would go to sleep on his Dad's lap when the sermon was on. In the summer they would walk back across the fields – up Mill Lane and straight across on the footpath. There used to be a field with a big dip in it and they used to roll down it. There were lots of young people and they would go together. The ministers would come around in the week to visit people – they would often come around by bike.

Primary School at Newbold Verdon

The children used to walk from the Heath going down in the morning then back home for dinner and then back for the afternoon. Later on, Rex's Uncle Len used to take the children in the car down to the school. When the school started doing dinners they stopped for them instead of coming home.

'We used to all walk together down to school. You could go out in the street then with no worries. You went into the front door into a big hall with 4 classes off with a kitchen and a cloak room. We had proper dinners at school – it used to be free I think – you didn't have to pay and you didn't need dinner when you got home. We got a third of a pint of milk – it was full cream milk. In the winter they used to have to fetch it in and put it by the radiator because it would freeze and the cream would come up out the bottle and the cream would stick up out of the top of the bottle. It was lovely we used to drink the cream off the top.'

There was a school field and they would play there – hide and seek and tig. They also did gardening and one of the teachers would show them how to set seeds and plant things. There was no uniform.

Secondary school at Ibstock

At 11 Rex went to school in Ibstock.

'If you passed the exams, you went to Bosworth – if there had been another place I'd have gone. But I was 6 weeks in bed with rheumatism so I got behind with school.'

There was no school uniform and you went on the bus to Ibstock on a bus that went round the villages – Rex thinks Newbold Heath was the last stop.

'The Bus was Bedford Utility with wooden seats. I can remember once – John Cheshire – we were both there – and the bus broke down – the accelerator rod broke – him and me sat on the wing with the bonnet up – we were moving – he'd say 'up a bit,up a bit' and we'd pull the rod – the

driver had control of bus but we were doing that as he was moving along. We were working the accelerator for him! Not all the way but some of it.'

Rex did woodwork at school and made a coffee table which his mum had for years. It was a mixed girls and boys' school. The girls did sewing and the boys did woodwork, and sport if you wanted to. Rex was not keen on sport.

Rex said the teachers were good. Mr Measures was the headmaster. There was the cane if you got into trouble. He remembers John Cheshire, Della Prime, Fowkes who had the garage at Ibstock and also remembers someone Petcher.

He finished school at 15 or 16 and went straight to be an apprentice at Wathes in Leicester. The shop was down High Street and they had a place opposite the Jewry Wall down a side street. He used to get a bus at 7 o'clock into Leicester. They took half an hour for dinner because then they were able to get the bus home at 5 :15pm. The manager was really helpful and let one of the men clock them out later at 5:30pm so they could get their bus home. He went to night school one night a week and the person he worked with also taught at night school. It was good teaching and he could do the job properly when he left.

He started his National Service at 21 rather than 18 because he had deferred because he was an apprentice. He had a bit of a holiday first and then went in December. Rex said it was 'the easiest 2 years of my life!' He used to come home each weekend. The first 8 weeks were in West Kirby (Liverpool) and he then went to Melksham (near Bath). He knew more than the tutors because he had already done all the work on his apprenticeship! They had an exam at the end of the course. It was in a big hanger and they had to look at a generator on which the examiners had put a fault. It wasn't charging the battery. So, Rex told him that the problem was that there is a break there somewhere. 'No, he said that's not it. I told him technically then 'I've been doing this for 4 years – 2 or 3 times a day - do you mind testing it?' He tested it and it was a genuine fault!! Rex passed out as Junior Technician and worked on planes such as the Canberra. He was demobbed at 23 and came home to join the family business.

The Coal Business

'Dad borrowed a horse and cart and built up the coal business. The coal business supplied house coal - which was rationed. They supplied local villages. Miners were given a ton a month. His Dad would fetch two or three tons from the pit on the tipper lorries.

They would put the first ton on and weigh it and then the next ton and the next one. The coal would be tipped outside the miners' houses and they had to get it in. They had to barrow it in. A lot of the time the miners didn't burn it all so they would let people have some. They would come with a barrow and take a barrow load away. The size of coal from Bagworth and Ellistown would vary – some big, some small – just as it came out. When they were on holiday from school Len and Rex were allowed to drive the small lorries from the pit bank down to the weigh bridge and back again because it was on private ground. That was at Bagworth, Nailstone or Ellistown. Then his Dad would take over the driving for the last load from the weighbridge. At one time – at the end of WWII they had 13 lorries.'

Coal was delivered to Newbold, Ratby, Barlestone, Braunstone and Leicester. The coal money was collected on Saturday – it was not usually paid when the coal was delivered. It was a weekly delivery and some people would delay paying but they would always pay. They delivered as far as Wharf Street in Leicester.

When they gave up the coal business it was taken over by Michael Preston's Father who lived in the house next to the Swan pub. Their coal yard was on Dragon Lane near to the Miners Institute.

Then they got rid of the tipper lorries and went down to milk and potato delivery. Three lorries did the milk on 7 days a week and two or three lorries did the potatoes. 'He collected the milk from the farms in churns. There was a potato firm in Leicester – Wartons ??He used to collect potatoes at the farm and deliver them where they wanted them delivering. They would go as far as Cardiff and that was a long way then! It used to be an overnight job. So, you would go about 11 or midnight to get to the wholesale markets the next morning. They would drive straight to the market'.

Rex did it odd times if one the drivers were on holiday.

'I'll always remember one – we got one lorry and the engine blew up down there (in Wales) – we had to have a new engine put in down there – as it happened, we'd got two lorries down there and through the market they got hold of the driver and he brought the driver back.
We had to go down – so Walt Salisbury -he drove first bit – he said "I can do that job – long distance ". I said "you drive the first bit then and I'll drive the rest". Coming back, we'd got the two lorries and he drove the other one back. Coming back, you know it's bad enough now, but then there weren't the laybys to draw in and have a drink and a rest. I was leading because I could find the road and could we find a layby that I could draw two lorries in? But we found one and he said "I'm thankful for that stop – I can't do it- I can't do it." But we had a good rest and then drove off. The lorries were empty so it wasn't hard work.

When we got back and he said "No – I'll stick on my coal delivery!"

The Garage

In 1947, after the Second World War Rex's father set up and built the garage. The brickie who built this was Freddie Smith and Harold and his son Len did the labouring to build it. He built the garage business up from scratch. Rex at this time was an apprentice car electrician in Leicester.

Wartime at Newbold Heath

'We didn't have any problems with bombing up the Heath. We had an unexploded bomb down the village at the bottom of Red Lion Lane. It didn't explode. It was at the end furthest from Main Street – away from the village luckily. Them down there had to evacuate. A family – the Frearsons – they had 3 daughters came to live with us – well 2 of them did anyway – I don't know if the third did. So, there were 7 or 8 of us in the house. My Dad built us bunk beds in the front room. They lived with us until the army came – the bomb disposal - and treated the bomb so it was safe. It was quite a while and then they moved back.'

‘My Dad was the air-raid warden. He’d got a phone you see with the coal business. He was the only one with a phone – there wasn’t even a phone box there then. They’d ring him up and he’d go out and blow the whistle to tell everybody – they didn’t have any alarms – he’d go round tell them there was a raid on and they had to stop in. He’d come home and we had a big table and mother had got us all under the table with our backsides sticking out! Lots of people used to come and use the phone. My Dad was that way – he would let them use it.’

‘When they were bombing Coventry – we could hear it. He had tipper lorries doing open cast coal to the power stations. They used to ring up in the morning and say we want 2 or 3 tipper lorries today to help shift the rubble – according to how bad the bombing had been. They were commandeered – if they needed the lorries, they took priority and they had to go.’

‘I can always remember VE Day. On the corner of Merrylees they built a big bonfire on the road. Everybody helped’

Rex’s Dad went round the farms in one of the lorries getting all the scrap wood off the trees. On this occasion or another celebration, the weather was not very good so everyone went into the lorry garage, it was a dirt floor, and they took all the tables in and had the party in there!

‘I know – I remember before D Day I think it was before D Day – the troops went down the Bagworth Road – where they came from and went to, I don’t know. But I know they were on their way from the north to the south. There was a convoy I think lorries were going by for 2 or 3 days. They used to stop and we would give them a drink. They went by for a long time and we used to sit and watch them.’

Mining

A lot of the men on the Heath were miners ‘I’ve reached 90 but they were lucky if they reached 65. With the mines and all the dust. They didn’t make the pension age – some did. My Grandad did – but a lot of them died before they reached 65. It was the dust on the lungs. They used to come home black. There were no baths. They used to come home and wash at home. The women used to look after families.’

Shopping

‘We used to come down into Newbold to shop but what we used to do – the Co-op was there mainly – Mr Herriman used to live along the top – he used to come round one day and collect the orders. Then, the milkman used to come round and when he’d done the milk round he used to go and deliver all the orders from the Co-op – because they were all Co-op. The butcher used to come round in a van. The Pork Butcher from Ellistown used to come round with sausages, bacon, pork pies and that sort of thing. He’d come one day a week. The butcher was Freemans of Ratby. Bread was delivered daily by Priestnalls of Desford. Wilf Bills used to work there. The bread was baked early and delivered that day. It was fresh bread but it didn’t keep. Lovely bread. The bread was unsliced and we would toast it in front of the fire on a toasting fork. We always had a turkey for Christmas which we ordered from the butcher. The milk – earlier on – Gerald Bates, from Chater Farm used to bring the milk in a big tank – he used to cool it – and come round with it on this tank on wheels. It was on a swivel so when he picked it up it stopped level. You would go out with the jugs and he would measure it out – a pint measure and put it in your jug. He used to do that daily. No fridges – kept in

bucket of cold water. He used to live up Dragon Lane after he'd finished. We used to have eggs off the farm. The Co-op then took over the milk delivery. Mr Herriman collected the money on Friday.'

'Mam was one of the first to have a fridge. Bert and Martha Statham – when we'd had the fridge a while, Dad gave them the fridge but they wouldn't put the electric through it – they used it as a cupboard – they never had electric upstairs – used candles upstairs. Just had one light downstairs.'

'Elijah Cave, he was one of the Cave's of Barlestone. At one time they would make ice-cream and bring it round. They had a push truck with ice in it to keep the ice-cream frozen. You went out with a basin and got some. Later on, Eric's came round in a van with ice-cream'.

'There was a chemist in Newbold village. It was where the Verdon Garage used to be. Mrs Prime ran the chemist and they would deliver up to Newbold Heath. There was a fish and chip shop run by Mrs Woodward but we didn't use them as they were too cold by the time you got back to the Heath! Barratts Bakery was on Main Street near where Oaks Crescent is now. There was a sweet shop on Dragon Lane, opposite the Miners Institute, in the front room of a house – but we didn't have money for sweets! When Verdon garage was built – the chemist moved to the double fronted house near Pasture Lane.'