Tantalizing Patchwork
Thoughts Provoked by Memories of Leyburne Road - Part I

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"Today its piecemeal, patch-work character intrigues as it tantalizes the visitor"
Thus John Newman on Dover in "The Buildings of England. Kent: North-East and East" (2013). That is fair comment. Yet Dover, which has much to hide, in fact hides too much. I intend to set about some uncovering in the hope that it will whet the appetite and even lead to some serious research.

A truly massive terrace Leyburne Road, east side, late 1950s

My memories of Leyburne Road begin late in 1944 when we returned from Pontllanfraith, Monmouthshire, a place which was very Welsh but then still in England. "Pont" is where my memories really begin. The context was war. My father, a master mariner who had been in the Merchant Navy and was now in the Royal Navy, was on very active service; I was to see him decorated by the King in Buckingham Palace soon after the war's end. My memory there is of a Yeoman of the Guard chewing gum and winking: of men in naval uniform at the end of a long room, one of them (but which one?) the King; of a blackened London noisy with trams; and of a bedroom in the Strand Palace Hotel with its own dial-telephone. That really was luxury.

Soon after I was born – in Fulmer Chase, near Burnham Beeches, a maternity hospital for naval wives, converted from a house which before the war had belonged to a tobacco king and after the war was burned down – we were evacuated to Pontllanfraith. "We" were me, my mother, and my grandmother. My aunt, who was a teacher, was billeted in the hills at Mynyddislwyn, with a black dog called Simba, and my grandfather, who in 1945 was to become the town's first Labour mayor, remained in Dover, coming across to Monmouthshire for frequent visits.

Life in "Pont" was full. Our house was small and semi-detached; a fierce, and fiercely loved, black and white cat, called Binkie Pullit, came with it. We could hear bombs falling on Cardiff and sirens sounding the all-clear. There were holidays in the rain to Borth and Aberystwyth and rides in the rain on the Rheidol Railway to Devil's Bridge. My pram was a true perambulator, a carriage, as prams used to be; there were no buggies then. Coughs and colds were treated with Mantelex, the delectable and probably addictive concoction of the local chemist, Mr Mantel, who sent us bottles of it when we

had returned to Dover. There were visits to "the Welfare" for health checks and war-time necessities; and we settled down to local life. The girl next door had the glorious name of Portia West; her father (or was he her uncle?), Granville West, became one of the first Life Peers, Labour of course. And my mother made her way in the Blackwood Players.

Blackwood was Pontllanfraith's larger neighbour and it had a dramatic society. There, sweeping round in rehearsals in a Gainsborough hat and gown and with me in tow, she played Lady Teazle in School for Scandal, directed by the redoubtable Mrs Rathbone, a former wife of the film star, Basil Rathbone. For a newcomer, almost a foreigner, to scoop such a part suggests that the Blackwood Players were a welcoming troupe and that my mother must have been a pretty good actress. I am convinced that I can remember all this as though it were yesterday, even though I was not yet four when we returned to Dover – in my case, or so I was told, with a Welsh accent. How did I find Leyburne Road?

20 -24 Leyburne Road, from the garden the Misses Kettner lived at 20, the A.T. Goodfellows at 22, Miller Higgs at 24

It was certainly different from the compact, pebble-dashed Welsh semi. For a start we lived in the top two floors of my grandparents' house in what seemed to me to be a massive red-brick terrace. Its houses looked severely on Leyburne Road, their gaze moderated by the decorative iron railings which protected callers from falling into basement areas. That is why they had survived the depredations of two world wars. I realise now that the houses were artful, in some ways almost arty. They were much less severe, indeed almost playful, from the back, with careful pretensions. They were roomy but looked larger than they were, tall thin houses facing across the town, with fine views from the main bedrooms, and with long thin gardens running down to Harold Street. Their garden railings, unlike their area railings, had fallen victim to the needs of war, to be replaced by hedges and make-do gates. My grandfather had purchased number 22 from a retired major and these houses were perfect for retired military men, their widows and unmarried daughters, and just as well suited to those who managed town and port. They had small conservatories, shattered in the shelling, and most of them had elegantly sturdy white-painted wooden balconies and good period mantelpieces. Bell-pulls suggested that there had once been maids. They had been built in the 1880s and while the development was too speculative to be true Arts and Crafts, there were decided Arts and Crafts touches. In that respect they were ahead of their game.

At 22 Leyburne Road a hallway led to a study and drawing-room connected by folding doors. Downstairs, leading to the garden and thence to Harold Street, were the dining-room and semi-basement of kitchen, scullery, and storage spaces, served by steep area steps. There were no real cellars. Upstairs were three floors of bedrooms, two

on each floor, each with a dressing-room, which might also be a small bedroom or a bathroom or a lavatory. These were adaptable houses and from the 1940s onwards most of them were turned into flats, or maisonettes, to use a favourite word of the day. My grandparents' house worked well in one other regard: the Town Council's Labour Group met there. For a small boy lurking outside, the smell of pipe and cigarette smoke was a magical enticement to the grown-up world of committee meetings. The warm smiles of Alderman Eckhoff and Councillors Mrs Brazier and Coatsworth, and the more reserved smiles of Councillor Mrs Bushell, who was to be Dover's first woman mayor, and of Councillor Constable, who taught at the Boys' Grammar School (his nickname there was "Bucket"), confirmed the magic. These men and women were wheeler-dealers, they were bound to be, but their devotion to their town was not in doubt. They had been called to its service. Theirs was the Welfare State, United Nations Association generation of local Labour movers and moulders, anti-Communist, pro-European and pro-American too. Their new world is now another world. I was not to enter that particular world but plenty of committees were to come my way.

Memories, of course, especially visual ones, play tricks but the war-time context which frames my first Dover memories is important. I remember waking up to broken glass; can that have been from the blast of one of the last shells? I remember walking with my grandfather to the sea-front and being terrified by the sudden roar and rumble of tanks, presumably en route to France; and later, in Cannon Street, there was another grim roar, this time from military vehicles and motor-cycles. Just outside Hatton's an old woman stepped in front of one and was knocked down. It can only have been a glancing blow because she got up and walked off, but I was horrified. Those are quite separate memories but I have hated tanks and motor-cycles ever since, even though I have ridden pillion on the latter. A longer memory, no less war-related, is of the bombed sites, one across from us in Harold Street, another across from us in Leyburne Road, and more at either end of Leyburne Road and Harold Street. These were dense with rosebay willow-herb, untamed buddleia, and rampant lilac. I have disliked them too, even lilac, ever since.

I realise from all this that I must belong to the last generation to have had at least some sense of pre-war Dover because, despite the destruction, the grid of streets was still intact in the 1940s and some irreparably damaged buildings were still standing – the houses of Marine Parade, the Grand Hotel, the former Burlington Hotel, New St James's Church, Laureston House, St Barnabas Church; there was the smell of gas in Woolcomber Street (which I learned to pronounce as in "cucumber"). Better yet, because my parents and their parents were Dovorians, entrenched in contrasting aspects of Dover life, I could tune into their memories and enjoy objects and stories and recollections that carried me well back into the nineteenth century. There was, for example, the delicate ivory fan which my great-grandmother took to the ball held after the Duke of Connaught, Queen Victoria's youngest son, had opened the Connaught Hall and Connaught Park. More recently, and yet far older, there was the small Samian ware bowl pieced together and presented by archaeologists to my grandfather. These, spanning nearly two millennia, were Dovorian artefacts.

My father's family were Binfield Bros, of Last Lane and Market Square, wine and spirit merchants, with grocery in the background. Their business in its prime had pretensions; its advertisements suggest steadily enlarged premises and an ambitious range of both wines and spirits. It was unkindly said that

the brothers drank more than they sold but they clearly had their good years. My grandfather Binfield, however, who died long before I was born, did not join his father and uncles. He became a Cinque Ports pilot. Such men had clout in the town. My father, baulked of a career in the Air Force, followed him to sea and would have followed him as a Cinque Ports pilot but, after the war and a return to the Merchant Navy (Third Officer on the Aquitania, finest of the great Cunarders), broken by a homebound spell as a secondary modern schoolmaster until defeated by his schoolmaster's salary, he became a North Sea and Baltic Sea pilot. He was thus Hull Trinity House rather than London Trinity House because Hull Trinity House was more relaxed about the age of its entrants.

There was sea and grocery on my mother's side as well. Her father, Arthur Thomas Goodfellow, began as a cobbler but became a Co-op insurance agent. He was one of thirteen children, of whom eleven survived, all of them short-legged, long-bodied, well-spoken, and obstinate. The girls went into service, and some did well at it, the boys were set to useful trades. Their father, Thomas Goodfellow, supposedly the son of an ostler and a lady's maid, is described in census returns as "mariner", in one as "deaf", in another as "unemployed". One employment, it seems, was with Mr Scott of Laureston House. Thomas Goodfellow captained Scott's yacht, and his portrait was painted by the School of Art's Principal East and exhibited at the Royal Academy, the old sea captain with the young boy, East's son, beside him. The Misses East still had it in their house in Maison Dieu Road. At least, that is what my grandmother told me, and it would fit with William H. East's "Meditation", exhibited at the Academy in 1891.

Thomas Goodfellow died in what should have been his prime and his widow, the strong-minded illegitimate daughter of a parson's son and a housemaid, held the fort. She made ends meet as a chapel-keeper and this is where grocery returns to the picture and politics comes properly into it. The chapel was Russell Street Congregational Church. That was how its chapel-keeper's son met Florence Parton, whose family were pillars of Zion Congregational Church, in Queen Street.

The Partons had come from Chatham to Dover in the early 1870s, first to Snargate Street, where John Parton employed one man and four apprentices, with two female servants, in 1881, and thence to Biggin Street, close to where they lived in Priory Road; St Edmunds Chapel, squeezed between the Biggin Street shop and the house in Priory Road, was used for storage. John Parton's family connections in the Medway towns were men on the make, boat builders and government contractors as well as grocers. One of them, however, John Parton's first cousin, Richard Dickeson, was already a leading Dover citizen. Dickeson was Rochester-born but his business, founded in that fateful year, 1649, and claiming to be "the oldest of its class in Great Britain", was based in Dover. There he was a wholesale and retail grocer, employing forty-two men and boys in 1881, with branches in London, Dublin, Aldershot, Gibraltar, "and other military stations". By 1870 he had entered into his Dover prime, mayor in 1871, 1881, 1882, and 1883, knighted in 1884. With his house on the Esplanade and the City Liberal as his London club, he was, perhaps, the closest Victorian Dover came to a merchant prince. The royal inauguration during his mayoralty of Dover's grand Town Hall and the ambitious public park explains why my great-grandparents were at the Hall's opening ball and I am sure that Dickeson's prominence in Dover explains why my great-grandfather Parton moved from grocery in Chatham to grocery in Dover.