My family and the first world war

Being born a few yards from the high tide of a lovely harbour at Christchurch, Hants, I think waters of the lakes, seas and rivers must influence a child at birth. For me this was reinforced by another home later, on an island facing the ocean for many years. For me this was a pattern of natural instinct as water is imbued into one's life – foggy, misty rain, raging seas, frothy patterns of a river eager to reach its outlet into the ocean on to a rippled, washed gulf.

Later I was a child on the Isle of Wight, twenty-six miles in circumference and home to old fishermen and sailors with rugged patient faces. We fed from the sea and from our own garden, which included chickens and tethered goats. Weekly, my mother and I fetched yellow, patterned, fresh butter from a farm nearby. There, a mug of warm milk was a treat, as I only had our goats' milk.

Daphne at St Helens, Isle of Wight

That was eighty years ago. I had a room of my own and, being a light sleeper, I used to sit up in bed and watch the flashes of gunfire with the distant

boom, boom, from France. It was the only way of life I knew, in my home on a hill facing France with the Channel in between. There was no doubt in my mind that somehow I was going to be a sailor. Then, women were never sailors in the Navy – but this has changed sixty years later.

I remember asking Mamou, a very practical young woman who lived with us:

'Does your Navy have the same uniform like us?' and Mamou replied:

'In Switzerland we have not got a Navy'. So out the atlas came, and I was shown where the Swiss lived; so began geography lessons, aided by my parents' stamp collections.

I began to grow up, but not alone. The house was full of people – some stayed and others were nearly permanent. There were children of parents serving overseas in Malta and Gibraltar as I remember. Wives stayed where the ship was war-based – refitting and refueling I should think; their offspring as they grew older went one by one to a mainland boarding school.

An early 19th century sketch of St Helen's Parish Church, Isle of Wight

Daphne's father, John Henry Pearson

Daphne aged 3 years and her father outside St Helen's Vicarage, Isle of Wight

My father was a parish priest, who could not join up due to a bad left eye. The parish was much dispersed, and the main church at St Helens was a good way from the main village near the sea. We lived on top of a steep hill rising from the houses below. The Vicarage was very modern and had spare rooms for our boarders. My mother was kept very busy and also helped my father with his parish duties. He rode a black bicycle with a large leather saddlebag. Another duty he undertook was being a special constable, which gave our policeman a break. The two jobs could be combined when sometimes my father did a patrol at night.

My mother was a good organiser, a careful housekeeper and a very good cook. Now eighty years later, after reading her 'book' of memories (at least the part begun before coming to the Island) I find she was rather unworldly and unsure of herself. She had seven brothers and sisters and she was the third from the bottom in age; the youngest was Aunt Grace. My mother also had two stepsisters' and one stepbrother.

I have many photographs and prints, still intact, taken by my mother. In her diary she records that my father gave her a camera to her great delight, in about 1909 or 1910. Where she could not take pictures of places or scenes, she bought the best postcard views, sometimes in sets, and many are still in good condition.

Daphne's mother, Jessie Amelia Pearson, neé Benson

The large garden was easily organised. The postman, whose name was Coleman, delivered letters early in the morning – in those days letters were generally sparse. Coleman became our gardener after his round, and some days he had his meal with the others. The children had to call him Mr. Coleman, and in fact I never knew his Christian name.

At St. Helens I learnt a great deal about gardening and fruit and vegetable growing, and the delights of picking the fruit. Looking back, I took it for granted that if there was enough land, everyone grew asparagus, rotating beds for cutting. In the winter, especially after storms, a large cart and steaming cart-horse toiled up the hill with loads of seaweed – a great heap was made, about three loads piled up; later it was spread between the cut-down crowns in the winter. During the season asparagus was eaten for lunch or evening meals every day except Sundays, and that still left a

lot to bundle up and give away. Potatoes were dug up as required. Three kinds – early, medium crops and winter ones – were neatly mounded in a stack one yard high, covered with straw and then soil on the top in case there was a frost, which was rare. The first time that I saw snow on the Island, and that was sparse, was in 1919.

Coleman was a small man with bony, deft, large hands, kindly but quite firm about the way things had to be done and when. He knew that the kitchen had to have vegetables put in the scullery and rinsed by a certain time. He never minded my probably ceaseless questions – usually on vacation time. Part of the summer-time father taught Oxford undergraduates who stayed in the house, to polish up and learn more Latin, Greek and Hebrew. These young men were Siamese, or Burmese and Indian fourth-year undergraduates. During wartime they had to get home the best they could, or remain and continue with their tutoring.

At five years old I was reading simple picture books, but later at nine, I was attending the young men's classes in Latin. My father gave me almost daily lessons in Latin so that I could catch up. French was spoken at lunchtime and during the afternoon with Mamou, and at other odd times.

From perhaps six or seven years old we would walk down to the village which consisted of a very large green, alongside green-edged, red-brick houses scattered at intervals with shops. One important one was the sweet shop run by Mrs. Trishler. She served the sweets out of large jars of humbugs, acid drops and many-coloured fruit drops. My pocket money was a penny for 10 sweets. 'Stock is not as it used to be,' she always said. She sold other things from the corner window.

Next-door was a haberdasher. One day my mother and I were alone and a tall, thin lady came near us peering at something. I pulled mother's arm, but I was quietly reprimanded for interrupting her purchases. In agitation I stared at the floor around the lady's feet:

'But Mummy, the lady's elastic has gone – her knickers are on the floor!' I was hastily sent out of the shop and the remaining women fixed up the lady.

Chinka, pronounced by us as Chinky, was born two weeks before me. His pedigree was a cross between a Pekinese and a Sealyham, with colouring of white and big patterning of chestnut. Chinka or Chinqua is American Indian for Chestnut. His fur was long and tough. He was larger than a Sealyham and his face was like a large Pekinese with a glistening black-button nose. He was my guardian, and always slept under my pram or walked alongside when moved. No leads were used. His aggression was fearsome and hostile with rowdy boys, and he seemed to have his own rules. My parents got used to his two- or three-day disappearances – messages used to be received by my father of his sightings. He always returned, quite unrepentant and often very hungry.

Chinka was never allowed upstairs; he always slept in one of the three stables with plenty of straw near the kitchen yard, which had a stout gate that was never locked. It was to his advantage to be near the kitchen, especially in the morning when the scullery copper was lit and the kitchen range heated up. There was a large, long, coloured rug lying along the deep fender. He would sniff at the big double saucepan of real Scotch porridge simmering. Chinka was full of character and determination. He liked Mr. Coleman who represented access to the kitchen quarters. Once, he presumed to be in charge of law and order over an escaped hen – of course Chinka had connived the original havoc outside a very strong wire pen; he had his own sense of humour.

In the summer we were all very busy. There were two lawns to mow, and a fearfully long grass bank in front of the house with a pretty wide drive. Our Pompey (slang for Portsmouth) friends found a good solution – I do not know who initiated it. On a Friday a few sailors turned up and Coleman borrowed another mower. They trailed into the kitchen for a cup of tea and left bags of sugar lumps. They mowed and mowed, carefully marking the tennis courts out. Everything (nets, etc) was measured. The seamen walked singly through the side gate to the kitchen and collected baskets of currants – mostly black, some red and white – and went down to the kitchen garden entrance where a vehicle was parked. Off they went to Ryde, then over the channel by steamer to Pompey. On Saturday afternoons the officers came about 1.30 p.m. and played tennis. Mother had the deckchairs out and stools for us, or a rug. Afternoon tea was served and several local ladies dropped in to entertain.

My friend Patsy from the village was with us most weekdays. Patsy and I were born just a few days apart. Her father was Army and was killed before I remember things. Patsy's mother seemed to be older than my mother, quietly remote and a bit severe. I felt we had to be very quiet and good when we had infrequent afternoon teas at Patsy's place. As I write this, Patsy has married and moved back to her original home after World War II.

In the summer we were on the beach a lot; it was quite a walk back to the Vicarage. We always had two grown-ups with us as we often collected other children. On the left of the beach near the cliffs was the treacherous 'Blue Slipper'. It is a blue-grey clay and, when the tide recedes, blue slipper appears from the reedy Solent channel. In the early days quite a few strangers were sucked in, and it took three rescuers with boards and ropes to prevent people being sucked down to their death. As young as we were, we knew we must watch for strangers' children to warn them.

We also had a great friend called Alec, who had meningitis when he was born in my year, from May to August 1911. It was very hot, and many children had this distressing condition. Alec was always in everything, in spite of his wiry wheel chair; he shared in some pretty rough games on the beach over the safe side near the mouth of the Bembridge River where the grown-ups had their camp, as we called it.

The river was small but swiftly flowing, and quite a few boatmen were about if the tide was right for fishing. Bembridge could have been as foreign as Portsmouth, because we never went there, except once round by horse-drawn vehicles from the back of our small railway terminus station. Of course, the beach was our own home place to learn to swim, dog-paddling first; the littlies three to four year olds with their mothers and governesses (Mamou never swam) used to hold us in the water until we floated on our own. I don't think we were ever afraid. Angela, who lived with us, suddenly thought she would swim out on her own and cross the distant channel. I remember my mother diving in and me dog-paddling after her while she hauled Angela out from drowning.

With the incoming tide came the shrimps. Out came our shrimp nets and buckets. It was exhausting to scoop up enough for supper and for grown-ups' dinners.

When a child is small, the world that is seen is much larger than a grown-up's. When in later years a return is made to a place everything looks smaller, then the child within the grown-up says today 'I thought the place was bigger'. The feature of the entrance to our home was a winding gravel drive. Gravel I have never liked since, because to earn some more pocket money I would weed out the small grasses that popped up constantly in front of the turning area. The grass seed had blown in from the grassed areas. I have disliked the dull gold of gravel ever since.

Forget-me-nots were massed through the drive rose bed. The apricot rose 'Lady Hillingdon' looked pretty carpeted with blue underneath. As the flowers finished, they were barrowed out to the kitchen garden and spread in a long strip along the hedge that bordered the engine room with its gas generator (there was no electricity or telephone). Over the deadish plants light twiggy branches were laid and left until early spring. Then underneath were sturdy seedlings to plant out. There were also enough for the parish, which Coleman supervised.

Elder trees lined our lanes, and waffled along a steam-rolled, wide, ash path that led across to the village green at the far end near the railway station and the butcher. Our goats were milked at 4 p.m. When I was big enough I milked one goat, and mother usually coped with one or two – it depended on nature. Other vegetables that we grew, ate and gave away were beautiful tender leeks – bleached like celery in trenches with brown paper collars; small and different cabbages – winter, spring, etc.; carrots – young spring and later the large winter ones; radishes, the children's vegetable, because that is how we were taught how to sow seeds, as they take only 10 days to germinate, with a sure result. Tomatoes were not available or hardly known unless I have forgotten.

Strawberries of course came early, with straw carefully laid under the coming fruit and fishing nets laid with small wooden pegs. 'Royal Sovereign' was considered the best. Blackbirds were the usual menace. In concert, there were rows of raspberry canes, and new canes were an addition for future rows. 'Lloyd George' was a type that continued on for many years in England, I believe they originated in New Zealand. There was a row of 'white' raspberries, which were in fact deep cream in colour.

The old orchard had been there before the house was built. Except for the long grass being scythed, no one seemed to bother much. There were many old varieties of fruit, including pears of some size. I remember my mother bottled and made jams for the winter from all the fruit we grew, so she had a pantry full ready for the winter – a colourful sight.

The herbaceous border was very beautiful and special to my mother. She grew this amazing colour border herself, including delphiniums of several blues, tall and very spectacular; Michaelmas daisies; Mrs. Simpkins pinks; Lychnis of scarlet or white, the usual lovely perennials. After all, flowers had to be grown for the church and at times for the village mission church that was made of tin sheets. I was a baby when it was planned. I do not remember a plant nursery. Plants were swapped and a few rare parcels arrived from 'England ' as I called it, as the mainland to me was the thin line of coast I could see, of which Portsmouth was the City of Ships.

There was no greenhouse but we had cold frames for seeding. Catalogues came from Sutton's and Barr's, the latter for bulbs. Skirting around the lawn areas were many flowery shrubs: Viburnums, Irish Strawberry (Arbutus unedo) trees, clumps of lilacs (Syringa), interspersed with pines and good climbing trees. I loved climbing, Chinka watching anxiously with interspersed barks. A chore, which I liked, was cleaning out the two hutches of Belgian hares (rabbits) and my favourite white rabbit with a black patch. They lived near the forget-me-not beds.

Lining the formal driveway was a clipped laurel hedge, which I hated then and still dislike. Their only use was to crush a leaf into a screw jar, in which you could anaesthetise butterflies and insects to examine them, and then look them up in a book.

The (First World) War, at my age, was a way of life: young and old men on crutches, some with bandages, others lying around on the grass or sitting in the kitchen. Mother and I went to the village on certain days when Coleman or a messenger came up – another telegram had come to Mrs. So-and-so. If father could not go at once, mother went with flowers and edibles, whatever was useful to them and at hand. I waited outside, or walked to Granny Royle and told her the bad news of another killed. So another Red Cross card was put in the window, that meant a wife or mother grieving. I remember a cottage near the mission church with four white cards with

red crosses, a husband and three sons killed. At church on Sundays we prayed for those killed and missing, and for those in hospital.

I have no recollection of the day the war was over; we had no radio of course. I do not even remember church bells ringing out, perhaps there were not any, or fireworks. The most important day of peace is a complete blank. Perhaps it was a day of disbelief, and to many much grief.

I do remember during the war being told that we were going on a working holiday to Dornoch, Scotland. The dramatic part of the train journey was going over Forth Bridge. The train came to a stop halfway. No one was to lift a blind up in case of anyone lighting a match. The Germans were overhead. We stayed there some while and a guard kept walking up and down.

My father had to take the services at Dornoch. I know we made some good friends there. I loved the whitewashed houses around the shore and wharf. Also I was made an honorary member of the Gordon clan, and allowed to wear a proper kilt. Someone gave me a sporran. There was plenty of material to lengthen as I grew! I think I may have been seven or eight years old. I never remember going back to St Helens either. It was an intended break for my parents.

Mother made all my frocks. She was interested in smocking and I had some with varied patterns. Later on she explained those that belonged to different counties, or again to different types of work in which people were employed. As a child I disliked the colour green in wearing apparel. One birthday, mother made me a very smart linen frock, light green. How hurt she was when I cried, 'Mummy, you know I hate green'. Worse still, I would not wear it.

Christmas time always began in October when puddings were made. Enough for presents and future birthdays. It was a ritual involving everyone. All raisins had to be strigged (have their stalks removed) and then cleansed with other dried fruits with flour being rubbed through, and sifted out in large round wooden sieves. In those days large amounts of fruit were packed in blocks, straight from overseas countries. Sugar was in various-sized, blue, stiff paper bags.

Silver sixpenny pieces were scalded before being dropped into the final mixture. Everyone around stirred and wished. Then the large pans and pots were busy boiling the coarse cotton-covered basins. Later, on Christmas Eve in the early dark evening, the carol singers, some with hand bells, approached the house and encircled the porch and sang their carols; we then gave them fruit and nuts and money, put into a collection tin. With greetings and waving of lanterns they trooped away. I put out my Christmas stocking at the end of the bed, but logically I could not see how Father Christmas could come down a chimney without leaving any signs of soot! Christmas Day and Boxing Day were probably the same as in any household, with people coming in with their greetings and the exchange of gifts.

After our return from the North, my father had to go to Oxford to receive his Master of Arts degree at an encaenia being held in the Sheldonian Theatre in 1919 or 1920. Earlier he had obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree; at the time he was amongst 47 entrants and only five passed to get their M.A.! I wonder now whether he had been disadvantaged by not going to school. My great-grandparents had asked that the eldest son of my grandparents would live with them in Beverley and be tutored instead.

From what I gathered he was unhappy with his surroundings, a very large dour brick house, very solid meals and restrictions. One thing he did was to escape and join the Hull football club. He tried to avoid the heavy cooked breakfasts accompanied by porter, a dark bitter brown beer. He was always a very sparse eater, and I take after him. It must have been a great sense of relief when he was told he was going to Oxford, although he really wanted to be a policeman!

He went to Christchurch, also known as 'the House'. It must have been an extraordinary change in his life to be in the oldest college with a Cathedral and lovely surroundings. Because of his weakness in mathematics his tutor for that subject was the Rev. Dodgson, the Lewis Carroll of fame. I think it is generally known that every story he wrote contains a mathematical problem to be solved. Dodgson gave father a new short story with a problem, but the manuscript was stolen from his study in the Isle of Wight. Nothing was ever locked up and everyone was definitely honest over money. Father was very upset.

During the visit to Oxford, we stayed in a small hotel in The Broad (street). Mother caught a shocking cold, and was in bed for two or three days. A very nice couple staying there looked after me, whilst father was attending academic demands for the great ceremony. The weather was not good, but there were many wondrous places under cover. Near the hotel was a sweet shop and that is where I saw chocolates for the first time. Father bought a box for mother to cheer her up. Someone said the chocolate was made with coconut butter; they were awful. On the island we did not have cocoa either. One chocolate made me sick and it was not until I was in my advanced teens that I could eat anything with chocolate in it. Gradually I grew out of that.

The weather cleared up and we all attended the encaenia held in the Sheldonian Theatre. Father changed his white and black hood for a rich red one, and could add M.A. (Oxon) after his name. Mother has recounted the first time she went there, and amongst the famous names of the times was Mark Twain from the United States of America.

When returning later I could not understand why father had to have mathematics to be a policeman, or go into the civil service, or the Foreign Office. I supposed old Greek, Latin or Hebrew would not be much help.

Years before, he had married an Oxford girl, that is when my half-sister, Irene, and half-brother Reggie, were born. They both went to schools in Sherborne, Dorset; two separate buildings next door to each other. Both schools were old with nice grounds. My other cousins went there. I believe it is a very beautiful area. Reggie was an adventurous red-head always trying to climb the walls which separated him from Irene. In the end, father had to remove him and he went into the Navy. The ship he was to join was HMS *Monarch* which had sailed to Buenos Aires. Father took him to Hamburg and saw him off on to a passenger ship. Father wrote cards to my mother each day in German until he got home.

Much later, after Reggie had sent two cards en route to the Argentine, the Navy sadly told my father he was killed; he was aloft on the mainmast and fell on to the deck. Poor, poor daddy.

Irene, much older, was almost mother's age. She trained as a nurse in Edinburgh Hospital. If I became very ill, she came down and nursed me.

She was tall and gentle with dark hair. Much later on, she married a very handsome surgeon of her own age. They were sent to Richmond Hospital, where Bertie was a senior surgeon. After a while, Irene went back to full-time nursing in London and Bertie went his own disastrous way. She was a sister then at St Mary's Abbott. I did not see her often. I wish I had.

The next year, my parents were getting rather mysterious and both were very cheerful. The secret was out at last; this year we were going to France for a month's exchange or locum – Father was to be priest in charge of St Malo's Anglican church to enable the present clergyman to go home or somewhere else. There was to be no visiting, just the Sunday services, and there was no Evensong. We stayed in a *pension* right near the beach. There were a number of children with their nannies and parents. I was in the care of one of them when my parents went out, explaining they caught buses going to the villages on the coast, and walked and explored. I went with them once to Mont Saint Michele.

One evening, whilst we dined, the waiter offered us American style lobster which was steamy hot with lovely gravy. For me a small serving of lobster and mother said, 'Please give my daughter plenty of sauce/gravy'. The waiter looked very strange and looked at me and shook his head. I said 'What is the matter?' I laughed, and he went away smiling. You see the gravy/juice was almost pure brandy. Father's French was terrible and he usually shouted carefully in English. No one could cure Englishmen of this weird way of tackling this problem. I noticed when Father taught Latin or Greek, he never shouted. He was not deaf either.

On Sunday afternoons after Mass, we could do what we liked: go to the races, amusements; as there was no beach, we had an outing. Time went too quickly and we boarded the steamer to return us to Newhaven, then a train to Portsmouth, and lots of unpacking to do. Whilst away my parents let the house.

Back to the island, but whilst in Oxford our move to the mainland had been arranged, through Lincoln College in the Diocese of Oxford. We were going to Twyford, Buckinghamshire.