Battersea Girl

Tracing a London Life

Martin Knight

Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*

‘Martin Knight has produced a marvellously detailed chronicle of social history, based on the family reminiscences of 100-year-old Nell, the Battersea Girl, whose thorn-sharp memory reaches into the past with such telling effect. The cumulative power of the narrative is a remarkable achievement and such a book – about people so ordinary as to be extraordinary – will be enjoyed by whoever picks it up.’

– Alan Sillitoe, author of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*

‘A vivid account of a London working-class family in the early twentieth century when the south bank of the Thames was the children’s playground; everybody knew everybody and life was as dramatic as a Shakespeare play. This is living oral history as witnessed by Nell, the author’s grandmother, and is absolutely fascinating. By the end of the book, I knew Nell so well, and I admired and loved her. I also knew what it was like to be a working-class woman before feminism had kicked in.’

– Nell Dunn, author of *Up the Junction* and *Poor Cow*

About the Author

Martin Knight is the author of the novel *Common People*. He has also co-authored books with Peter Osgood, George Best and Dave Mackay. He lives in London and Norfolk with his wife and children.

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To Ellen Tregent (1888–1988)
Who else?

and my dad, Harry Knight,
who lit up the past and my life

Contents

Introduction

In 1973, when I was 15 years of age, I elected to take three Certificates of Secondary Education (CSE) as the culmination of my comprehensive schooling. In the hierarchy of school-leaving examinations of the time these were the bottom rungs of the academic ladder, behind the O level and the A level. Their purpose was, perhaps, to give some focus to boys and girls who lacked academic ambition and application but showed signs of having absorbed some of the teachings of their previous five years. The three subjects I chose were the only ones I enjoyed and in which I paid any attention: English, history and art. It was no coincidence that the teachers of these subjects at my school all treated their pupils as human beings and had the skills and enthusiasm to make the lessons interesting. Most of the teaching staff I had come across up to then were either counting time to 3.30 p.m., the six-week-long summer holiday or their eventual early retirement.

The history mistress, Miss Benthall, a young lady fresh from teacher-training college, suggested I base my final examination project on my family history. She obviously believed there would be more chance of my seeing this through than a study of the Napoleonic wars or medieval crop-rotation systems. I was aware of parts of my ancestry through my parents, but most importantly my paternal grandmother was still alive and living in Battersea, aged 85. She knew it all. She'd been telling us for years but nobody had been listening.

Grandma lived alone in a council flat at the top of Lavender Hill and fortnightly, on a Saturday, I accompanied my dad to visit her. As a young boy, it was exciting. The train journey up to Clapham Junction, then entering the

mythical land of London; the red buses, black taxis and busy markets; the general hubbub unfamiliar then in semi-rural Epsom where I lived; the climb up the hill; and the last-second visit to the off-licence to buy her a large brown bottle of Guinness.

On entering her flat, I was immediately immersed in a dark, dank world. The curtains were nearly always drawn (my grandmother was so contrary she probably opened them at night) and a musty smell of old empty biscuit tins prevailed. Besides a tiny kitchenette and an even tinier bathroom, the flat consisted of one room dominated by her large imperious double bed with Jesus Christ looking serenely down at the pillows from a crucifix on the wall above them. At the foot of the bed stood a small table, covered in a leathery tablecloth, with a chair at each end. On the table lay Grandma's magnifying glass and the *Daily Express*. Her habit of reading through the glass was a cause of great amusement to us children. In the corner was a television that already seemed ancient, sporting a preposterous aerial, like an upturned tuning fork, which dwarfed the actual set. Compared to our home, which itself was only a three-bedroom council house, her living accommodation seemed like a cupboard. Sometimes she tried to persuade us to accept a piece of Christmas cake or a ham sandwich, but Dad normally said we had just eaten. 'The problem is,' he would advise later, 'there's no telling exactly which Christmas the cake dates from.'

On one visit, Dad explained to her that I was producing a family history for my schoolwork and asked if she could help by putting flesh on some old bones, starting as far back as she knew. In a flash, she transported us back in time by 150 years, producing a prayer book from her bedside drawer that had belonged to her grandfather and had his pencilled inscription on the inside cover.

'It says *Patrick* Bradshaw. I thought his name was James,' queried Dad.

Grandma then told us both how my great-great-grandfather had come over to England from Ireland when the potato famine of the late 1840s struck, thereby interrupting a centuries-old pattern of agricultural living, and that he had changed his name to combat prejudice against Irish immigrants. In a single sentence, she had tied the family into the general history of the country and beyond.

So began an unfolding of the family ancestry. As we led her down particular roads on numerous subsequent visits, her story became ever more fascinating and convoluted. Her recall was vivid and precise. We heard of men making a living on the Thames, a river that had claimed the lives of at least two close family members, the discovery of a drowned aristocrat's body and the curse of the ensuing reward. She talked of labour strikes and family feuds, of suicides and fatal accidents, poverty and depression, of the spectre of drink, murder and wars, and of the bombardment of Battersea by the Luftwaffe. But she also spoke of the love, the loyalty and the laughs, of weddings, babies and trips to the Kent hop fields, all of which made life bearable. Indeed, she was never maudlin or sad as she recalled these often harrowing passages of her life. That was life. That was how it was. Everyone she knew was in the same boat. Although she took great pride in the strides made by her descendants and recognised the growing comfort of the modern world, it was a boat she would have happily climbed back into if she could.

There was so much information to go on, but Dad warned that we should not take everything she told us for granted. Much of what she had revealed was new even to him and he was sceptical. When she made an aside that she attended the great cricketer W.G. Grace's funeral because she was, for a time, his charlady, Dad interrupted. 'Are you sure, Mum? I haven't heard that before.'

‘Course I’m sure. You couldn’t mistake ’im, could yer? Not with that bleedin’ long beard.’

We visited Somerset House in London and collected what birth, marriage and death certificates we could and these in turn would prompt new questions. Sometimes Grandma may have had a small detail wrong, but generally everything we found backed up what she was telling us. We visited the newspaper archives at the Lavender Hill library, almost next door to my grandmother’s flat, and confirmed many of the other events she had described.

In a very short period, she gave me enough material for my project. I focused mainly on family events that tied in with historical ones and submitted the thing. It was all blue ink and felt pens interspersed with glued-in copies of birth, marriage and death certificates. Pride of place went to a copy of a letter sent to my grandmother from Winston Churchill, at the time Secretary of State for War, commiserating with her on the loss of her husband in the Great War. Miss Benthall praised the finished product highly and was amazed at the amount of research she thought had gone into it. I did not let on that nearly all the information had come from my grandmother’s lips and bedside drawers.

When I was eventually awarded a Grade 2 CSE rather than the Grade 1, as Miss Benthall had expected, she said it must have been because of a poor performance in the written examination. She was right there – I never sat it. My interest had moved on. Whilst I continued to visit my grandmother until her death at 100 years of age in 1988, I never really dug much further on the family history front, although I continued to absorb the stories she told me. Events of 70 years earlier were recounted as if they happened yesterday: what she said to him and what he said to her, who was a rum one and who wasn’t. Sitting at that table and listening, by now sharing the Guinness as an adult, I was as close as I could get to travelling back in time without a Tardis of my very own.

In the last couple of years, my interest in genealogy has been reawakened, mainly by the Genes Reunited website, part of the Friends Reunited stable. Within a few weeks of uploading our family tree as I knew it, I was contacted by two separate members who had registered at the site and who shared the same great-great-grandfather in Battersea. Dots were quickly joined and even more of my grandmother's apparent musings were confirmed. It led to the discovery of two living relatives – a niece and a nephew of Grandma – both now in their 80s and both still living in Battersea. They told me so much about my grandmother's middle years. It was a delight to find them because not only did they share Grandma's facial features but they also spoke with the distinctive old Battersea accent I thought I would never hear again and which I had often tried to conjure up in my mind. If Genes Reunited continues to grow at its current rate, within a few years everyone really will be connected if they so wish.

From Genes Reunited, I moved on to the 1901 Census site and then on to earlier census information from various other portals. My searches took me to war graves, the records of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen, newspaper archives, police records, war diaries and much, much more – all this practically without leaving my desk.

Slowly but surely a picture emerged of my family history with detail I could never have imagined. More importantly, I could put my grandmother's eventful life into context, something that had not been easy 30 years earlier. Belatedly, I began to appreciate (as much as one can who does not live it) her life and her times. I regretted laughing at her quaintness, her quirkiness, her superstitions and antiquated ideas. I realised what a remarkable woman she was and decided the least I could do was write a book about her life.

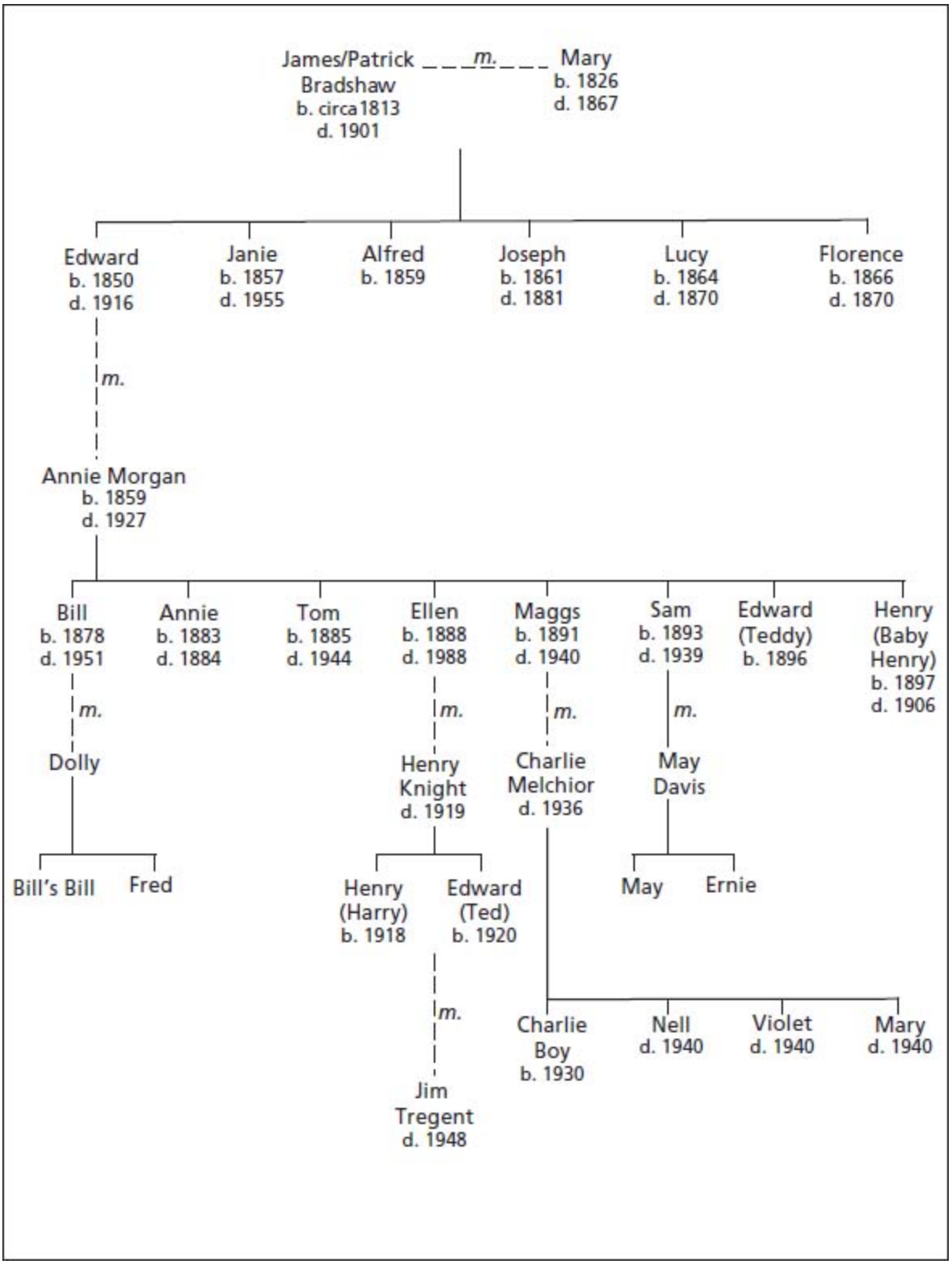
As she would say, you couldn't make it up.

Therefore *Battersea Girl* is a novel of sorts, but it is chiefly a story of my grandmother's long life. I have borrowed from the library of poetic licence and inserted a couple of fictional themes and characters and merged one or two others. I have mixed up some names, places and events because, after all, I am not the only person descended from and connected to the characters in this book. And I have guessed what the various people did and said in different circumstances. I have also had to follow a number of thought processes in deciding what made certain people do certain things. Nevertheless, I would estimate that 80 per cent of the events recounted did actually happen and are supported by documentary evidence.

For me, the remarkable thing about Ellen Tregent's life is how unremarkable it was for the period. So many people I have contacted who are also researching their family histories have found similar stories and patterns. If the book prompts just a few people to mine their family's past and derive just some of the enjoyment and fulfilment that I have, then I judge it to have been a worthwhile exercise.

And Mum, don't fret, we'll do your side next.

Martin Knight
Norfolk, 2006


James/Patrick Bradshaw
b. circa 1813
d. 1901
m.
Mary
b. 1826
d. 1867
Edward
b. 1850
d. 1916
Janie
b. 1857
d. 1955
Alfred
b. 1859
Joseph
b. 1861
d. 1881
Lucy
b. 1864
d. 1870
Florence
b. 1866
d. 1870
m.
Annie Morgan
b. 1859
d. 1927
Bill
b. 1878
d. 1951
Annie
b. 1883
d. 1884
Tom
b. 1885
d. 1944
Ellen
b. 1888
d. 1988
Maggs
b. 1891
d. 1940
Sam
b. 1893
d. 1939
Edward (Teddy)
b. 1896
Henry (Baby Henry)
b. 1897
d. 1906
m.
Dolly
m.
Henry Knight
d. 1919
m.
Charlie Melchior
d. 1936
m.
May Davis
Bill's Bill
Fred
Henry (Harry)
b. 1918
Edward (Ted)
b. 1920
May
Ernie
m.
Jim Tregent
d. 1948
Charlie Boy
b. 1930
Nell
d. 1940
Violet
d. 1940
Mary
d. 1940

I

Birthday Girl

The old lady sat in the wheelchair and frowned at the people around her. It had been a real effort getting her out of bed and sitting upright and the disruption still irked her. The nurses had made her as comfortable as possible, propping her upright with pillows and cushions. A pretty little blonde girl of about five years of age stood beside her, as if on guard, and gently rested on her hand the old lady's, so thin it resembled a transparent glove pulled tight on a skeletal hand, and stroked it tenderly. 'You all right, Grandma?' she said softly.

A man with a large chain around his neck, who the old lady had never clapped eyes on before, stood in the middle of the room. He had a silly upturned moustache of the style once favoured by RAF fighter pilots with names like Trubshawe. With a rattling cough, he cleared his throat and began to speak loudly. 'I am honoured to be invited here today to mark the occasion of the 100th birthday of Ellen Tregent. Although I had never had the pleasure of Ellen's acquaintance until this afternoon, I am told that she has been a resident of Wandsworth for all of her 100 years and has led a full and exciting life. It is a remarkable achievement and I am sure that she and all of her family and friends here today are very proud. I would like you all to raise your glasses to Ellen. To Ellen. One hundred years young.'

'To Nell,' chorused the guests, old and young, preferring not to echo the mayor's little pun and calling the old lady by the name they all used. The small girl climbed up on the

chair, placed her glass of orange to the old lady's lips and gently tipped it, but Nell's mouth remained resolutely closed. A small trickle of liquid ran down her chin.

Although, one by one, the guests came and spoke to Nell, she did not reply. She could not. She would have liked to, but she was simply unable. Her brain still worked, but the link that enabled her to communicate her thoughts had been broken months before. If she could have spoken, she'd have told the Mayor of Wandsworth to 'sling his hook' for starters. He'd never found the need to come and see her and celebrate her life for 99 years and 364 days, she would have said, so why now? As an avid consumer of television news and current affairs in the 1960s and '70s, she was reminded by the mayor's moustache of two men who sported similar ridiculous hair displays on their top lips and who filled her television screens almost daily for a period. One was a Post Office trade-union leader, the other a Tory MP. Nell thought them both fools and show-offs, and felt this man must be the same. In her part of the world flamboyancy of any kind was the eighth deadly sin.

Nell knew most of the people in the room but couldn't name them, especially the great-grandchildren. There were so many of them and they were nearly all blonde – a Bradshaw trait, in childhood at least. But she knew that the little girl holding her hand was Michelle, her eldest great-granddaughter. Although they were separated by 95 years, they enjoyed a special bond. Neither could describe it, but that tie was nature's way of connecting the past to the future. Michelle was kind and sweet, and preferred to fuss over the older members of the family than charge around the room chasing balloons excitedly with the other children.

In the corner, sitting alone sipping a cup of tea, was Mrs Bruno, a large black woman of some 50 years. She had been Nell's district nurse for the last decade, right up until she had finally entered the nursing home. She was sitting upright and had not yet removed her large overcoat. Nell

wanted to smile at her, call out and make her feel more at home.

She remembered the first time Mrs Bruno had appeared at the door. As she had loomed in the doorway, her large frame and colour had scared Nell. She had told her to clear off, that she didn't want her sort in her house and would complain to the council. Fortunately Mrs Bruno was by then accustomed to such welcomes from the very old residents of Battersea, and swept the remarks aside and set about making Nell a pot of tea. It took a year or so but the two women developed a real fondness and respect for one another, and Mrs Bruno became the last new friend that Nell made.

A smiling, kindly grey-haired man came over and sat down beside Nell. He tugged up his trousers as he settled into his seat. It was a family habit that had been unwittingly passed down the generations. Little Michelle beamed at her granddad as he unfolded a piece of paper. 'This is a telegram from the Queen, Mum, wishing you a happy 100th birthday. How about that, eh?'

'And she says you can have tea with her if you make 200,' chimed in another voice from behind her chair. Its owner was more portly than the other man, but there was no doubting they were brothers. These were Nell's boys – Harry and Ted. *Good boys*, she thought as she listened to them. *Never a spot of bother*. Both had left Battersea almost as soon as they could shave and had done well, living lives of comfort and prosperity that Nell could never have envisaged. But they'd always bring their families up to Battersea to see her when they could and she went to them alternately every Christmas. Standing beside Ted, smiling at Nell, was Charlie Boy, a cousin of the Knight brothers. Charlie was no boy, knocking on for 60 years now. He had particular reason to be here, saluting Nell today. A couple of the young children could not take their eyes off him, as they studied the patchwork of different shades and contours of

skin on one side of his face and the sudden jerking of his body that was so violent they thought his head might roll off. *Don't stare, it's rude*.

Nell tried to smile and acknowledge her boys, but instead she looked straight ahead with knitted brow. She was extraordinarily content, though, here in the bosom of her family. The struggle was over. The spectre of war and strife seemed to have slunk away. Harry and Ted had managed to find work all of their lives: one had been employed in an office and the other owned his own business – something to which people from Nell's generation and Battersea very rarely aspired. They now lived in comfortable retirement, running cars and enjoying foreign holidays. Her grandchildren were also all in work now, doing jobs with titles that she did not recognise or understand: accountants and consultants, software engineers and personnel managers. They enjoyed a lifestyle and level of mobility Nell could not relate to. When they visited their grandmother they spoke about the limited common ground they had, namely their parents – Nell's children – and the past. She could talk for hours about the past. She had so much of it. She was a great one for peppering oaths of despair in her everyday conversation – Lord 'elp us! What is the world coming to? Gawd forbid – but when she looked at her family and their lives, even she conceded that the world was surely a far better place overall than the one she was born into. It had to be.

The party did not last more than a couple of hours on this cold March afternoon. Weightless flakes of snow fell and disintegrated on the lawn outside the window. The Mayor of Wandsworth left as soon as it was politely possible. The uniformed chauffeur held open the door of the 22-year-old Rolls-Royce and the mayor stepped in and travelled back to his semi-detached house on the Wimbledon border. Later in the evening, he'd be climbing into his six-year-old Ford Escort and driving to Sainsbury's for the weekly shop with

his wife. The photographer from the *Wandsworth Borough News* followed the mayor's lead and this was the signal for others to stand up, brush down their trousers and pick up keys. It was a party in name only. The guests knew they were attending a celebration, but the mood was tempered by the unspoken realisation that for most of them it would be the last time they would see Nell Tregent.

The helpers at the nursing home started to make themselves visible and markedly asked Nell a couple of times if she was tired. They, more than most, knew they would get no answer. Mrs Redcliffe, who ran the nursing home, came over to chat to Harry and Ted. 'She's a strong woman, your mother.'

'She is that,' said Harry.

'I bet she's seen a few changes in her lifetime.'

'She has, for sure,' he nodded again.

'What did she do for a living?'

'Survived,' Ted returned, slightly irked by the emptiness of the question. What did she think his mother did – ran ICI?

Everyone kissed Nell goodbye, planting lips on her forehead as they filed out of the dining-room area. Most were heading out to the suburbs and beyond, where their routines would be quickly resumed. There were groceries to buy, homework to be done, wine to be drunk and arguments to be had.

Little Michelle had still not let go of Nell's hand and when any of the toddlers came near for their kiss goodbye, she shielded Nell's slight and delicate frame. Finally, as the last of the guests left the room, Michelle climbed up again on Nell's chair and whispered into her ear, 'I've got to go now, Grandma. Mummy and Daddy are in the car. I love you.'

Nell slowly and with great effort lifted a trembling hand and stroked the little girl's cheek with the side of her finger. 'Bye, bye, sweetheart.'

'Bye, bye, Grandma.'

Michelle ran out into the drive, spraying gravel in her haste, ‘Mummy! Daddy! Grandma just spoke to me. She just said goodbye to me. She did. She really did.’

‘OK, darling, come on now, hop in. We’ve got to get off,’ said her father, who had timed his exit perfectly to narrowly avoid the worst of the Wandsworth one-way-system rush-hour traffic jams and to arrive home in time to at least mow the front lawn before it became too dark.

* * *

Nell had lost count of the years. She remembers 1980. Her Ted was 60 years old in that year and she’d been well enough to go to his party down in Sussex. Ted’s wife, Eileen, had collected her in the car and dropped her back again at 10 p.m. And she remembers Prince Charles and Lady Diana getting married and all the fuss surrounding it, but she could not say definitely if that was before or after Ted’s 60th. She’d continued to visit Harry and Ted after 1980, but her memories became blurred and the Christmases merged into one. Before 1980, there was no confusion whatsoever. Years and dates were Nell’s thing. Always had been. From a very young age, she had assumed the responsibility of family archivist, mainly because nobody else wanted to do it (or could do it as well as her). She knew all the birthdays, where people lived, and when and who was buried where. Whether she was your mother, sister, aunt, cousin or grandmother, Nell’s birthday card was the third certainty in life. Even after a person had left this world, she continued to acknowledge their birthdays. When her sons had visited, Nell often started the conversation with something along the lines of, ‘Uncle John, your grandfarver’s bruvver, would ’ave been 128 on Thursday.’

Back in her flat, there were photographs, familiar ornaments and artefacts to ground her. There was the

prayer book that had belonged to her grandfather, with the occasional passage that must have had some special meaning to James Bradshaw all those years ago underlined in pencil, and the flowers, now 150 years old, pressed flat into its pages. The photograph of her niece dressed in a black cloak, wearing a mortar-board, at her graduation ceremony. It was a first for a member of the extended family to go to university and therefore Nell found it easy to remember that year, 1962. Everyone was so proud of Helen. Before her, the only time the Bradshaws had come into contact with anyone from a university was when, as children, they hurried down to Putney Bridge to watch the start of the Oxford–Cambridge boat race.

On the mantelpiece, next to the Double Diamond ashtray, which had somehow found its way to Nell's flat from the Cornet and Horse pub, was a china model of a horse in flight. A scroll on the base revealed its name: Arkle. Harry had bought this for his mother in 1966 after the horse won the Cheltenham Gold Cup for the third time. Nell liked a bet and had latched on to Arkle very early in his career and, she claimed, had won hundreds of pounds on him over his racing life. The boys doubted this, as any stake money would have had to come from her paltry pension, but with Mum they could never be sure.

In the drawer next to the bed was a tin of face cream with a tiny illustration on the cap of a Victorian man and lady courting. The lady holds a parasol and the man is bowing towards her, Walter Raleigh-style, the manufacturer's implication being that if you purchased this face cream you were more likely to be pursued by an eligible and handsome young bachelor. Nell remembers buying it in a small shop in Hastings and the year was most certainly 1919. She had gone there for the day on a special train from Clapham Junction packed with Battersea and Clapham day-trippers. Her husband, Henry, had not long returned from a final stint in France clearing the debris of the First World War and was

very weak from being gassed earlier on in the conflict. He was also suffering from a selection of other war-related ailments.

A few weeks previously, he had arrived in Battersea to discover that his wife was hopping down in Kent. Keen to surprise her, he made his way down into the Kent countryside on shanks's pony and located Nell among the vines. She welcomed the wretched man with, 'What the 'ell are you doing 'ere?' followed by, 'You look 'alf dead.' Which, she often mused later, he was.

Poor Henry came on the train that summer's day in 1919, though, despite his collapsing health, and they left baby Harry with Nell's mother, Annie. Like nearly all of the young men packing into the carriages, his suit was now ill fitting and his cap comically almost slid down over his eyes. The war had rendered him almost skeletal – there had been hardly an ounce of fat on him before he enlisted five long years earlier. Most poignant for Nell on his return was that he now carried his wedding ring in his waistcoat pocket because his fingers had become so thin it would no longer stay on. Large brown bottles of stout, pale ale and Guinness were being passed up and down the carriages and although Nell managed to knock two or three back on the journey out, Henry had barely sipped his.

There was a general air of excitement and chatter as the train steamed out of London. Couples picked up their relationships, young women coyly surveyed the returning menfolk, looking for husbands, and single men savoured the peace, contemplating the revived prospect of their lifetime unfolding.

After disgorging at the railway station, the now boisterous crowd headed straight for the seafront, not giving a second glance to the old crumbling castle perched doggedly on the top of the West Hill. They were not here on a history field trip, after all. Nell and Henry walked along the promenade with all the others, feeling the fresh sea wind whipping their

faces and hearing the cackle of Londoners at play on the beach beside them. At the pier, they turned around and walked back down the front, leaving the Battersea mob to pass through the turnstiles: they took the pretty little lift, like a train carriage, up to the top of the East Hill, preferring the solitude of the countryside to the bustle of the pier and the tinkling of the penny arcades. They walked arm in arm up and down the undulating hills towards Fairlight Glen, keeping the sea to their right and drinking in the novelty of being alone together. They did not pass a single soul. Even out on the ocean there were no solitary ships of any kind. Nell and Henry felt like the only two people in England. They sat on the so-called Lover's Seat, where, local legend had it, a lady, who lost her young man at sea, sat at night and flashed a torch forlornly in the hope that one day he would return to shore.

Before they reached the village of Pett Level, and realising they would have to turn back if they were not to be in danger of missing the train home, they laid out their coats in a secluded area and made love. Nell remembers the year and the occasion so well because she and Henry only made love twice. In later life and in private conversation with the female members of her family, she professed to be immensely proud of this fact; as if the physical abstinence was evidence of strength of character and a demonstration that sex was for procreation and nothing else. Harry was the result of their first time, when Henry was home on leave in 1917 and they had married hastily, and Ted would be the upshot of this union in Hastings. Ted was born in early 1920 and by that time Henry, his father, had been dead for six months.

Back at the nursing home, there were no such ornaments and artefacts to help Nell reassemble and order her memories. She had no idea what year it was. She didn't even know the day or hour. She vaguely understood she'd