

Chapter 1 In the beginning

I was begot by the union of Frank Rogers with Violet Edith Brinkman and turned up on the 7th September 1931.

Frank had two brothers and a sister. I never knew Frank's father but I remember stories about him driving the London/Birmingham Stage Coach; regularly he would blow his horn on cresting Pendley Beeches for his meal to be heated. I have early memories of my Grandmother, dressed voluminously in black at her little house in Henry Street, Tring.

Quite short in stature, Frank was a man with great charm and patience; always a ladies man and invariable asked to reply for the ladies at the many functions where he spoke. He trained as an auctioneer and forester at W Brown & Co, Tring, where he ran the cattle market before moving to Aylesbury. He loved his time spent in the agricultural world; a visit to a farm to perform the annual valuation would be an all day job with lunch, a cigar and cognac to follow. Then back to the office by bus to write up the valuation from his shorthand notes. Today's auctioneer will speed round 6 farms in one day dictating his reports as he goes: progress! For several years before retirement he was Sheriff's Officer for the county of Buckingham. The holder of this post had a duty which Frank would have hated if he had to perform it: to witness and certify any execution that was carried out in the County: fortunately none occurred during his time in office.

In the First World War he volunteered and found himself parading with a thousand or so before Lord Kitchener. Kitchener walked the ranks inspecting each man and when my father's turn came, Frank returned Kitchener's strong glare; this resulted in the order to step forward a pace. Frank thought he would be charged with dumb insolence: in fact

this gave him his first promotion and he moved on to become regimental sergeant major. He served at Gallipoli and had a couple of very close shaves. In each instance he heard the shell coming, threw himself to the ground and was all but buried in the soil thrown up. On one occasion a Turkish shell went straight through the entrance to a dugout, but failed to explode. On removing the shell, it was found to be made in Sheffield.

An accolade about my father always sticks in my mind. It was from George Simms, farmer and cattle dealer. On meeting George he said, "boy, if you are half the man your father is you will be OK".

My father was a good friend of Frank Bly the antique dealer of Tring; some years ago after my fathers death, Frank had been rummaging through some old papers and found a photograph of father that he thought I might like. Indeed I was most grateful to receive it; it showed him in full military regalia in Versailles in 1917. I remarked to Frank that I was not aware that my father had served in France and Frank agreed that he had not. Clearly a good day trip and we were amused to ponder the purpose.

My mother, Violet Edith was one of five daughters born to Brinkman the nurseryman of Berkhamstead. I never met either grandparent since both died early, but I heard stories, especially from Ivy the youngest born. Grandfather was a tough man to his daughters laying down strict rules and requiring them to work hard at the nursery. I gather that one of the female staff would help take produce to Chesham Market and apparently grandfather was always in a good mood on this day. (A quirk here is that at the wedding of Linda – see picture – on the 1st June 2014, I was in conversation with Linda's mother Marion who had previously had a copy of this tome and she identified grandfather as the cause of some angst! He had impregnated the

staff lady who had an illegitimate child Betty who was mother-in-law to Marion! }

Annie was the only sister not to marry, but I remember her telling Queenie of an experience she had with a man on Hunton Bridge, Watford. The man exposed himself and apparently it resembled a milk bottle. Queenie's question was "but my dear, half pint or pint?" (I have just learned that there might have been more to Annie than meets the eye – she died from a sexually transmitted disease!)

The nursery was a full mile from Berkhamstead Church. This gave the sisters an opportunity to put on their finery and parade to and from the church in the hope of meeting young men. Ivy did particularly well; she met Les Evett, farmer and dairyman; a man big in stature with an even bigger sense of humour. For me, Ivy's house was the big time. In the war you would walk in to a blacked out room, so thick with smoke you could hardly see across it. Clutching their cards would be the four players, some with green shades, and I would watch transfixed as piles of half crowns were moved to and fro. Untold wealth at the fall of a card!

It took Ivy several years to forgive me (aged 12) for putting a suggestion to her daughter Janet (aged 9) in her bedroom one night.

My mother was a good-looking and very intelligent lady; she had a gift for clairvoyance. Summer holidays were taken at Greylands Hotel, Margate, where a very happy atmosphere pervaded and all the holidaymakers joined in games on the beach. My mother would read tealeaves with uncanny predictions for the year ahead. Some were unsurprising, such as a pregnancy to an amorous couple, but others were totally out of the blue. During one of the games on the beach a guest lost her wedding ring. Everyone was

searching in the sand for the ring when my mother called a halt. We are going about this wrongly - let us all concentrate on thinking about the ring - she then walked over and plucked it from where it was buried in the sand. She had an exceedingly good eye for fashion; my father always said that somebody in the fashion world was spotting what she did. If she made a dress with huge buttons in 1936, huge buttons would be the fashion in 1937.

One of my earliest recollections is of a conversation with my mother when, aged six, she asked me if I would like a brother. "Of course not" was my reply, never imagining that my answer could have any bearing on events.

Early in the war my mother became mentally unstable and was institutionalised for the rest of her life, although her condition was much improved in the later years with the arrival of new drugs.

Uncle Len was a tall friendly and distinguished man living at Northchurch. He was an undertaker and had the horrific job of dealing with some of the 400 casualties in the dreadful train accident at Northchurch.

My father's brother Harry, married to Daisy, was manager of the tobacco department at the Army and Navy stores. When visiting him at the Stores I always rushed to see the model train display with half a dozen engines charging round the landscaped mountains. (unlike my later versions, these never came off the tracks). His house was bedecked with all manner of cigarette and cigar dispensers and he was hell bent on getting me into the habit. Thank goodness I detested the damned things. Harry had a daughter Marion and, yes, you have guessed it, I fell in love with her. She was a splendid female but out of reach due to both her lack of interest and her blood. It was not until she was married

that I learned she was adopted and so would have been fair game.

On the death of my father's sister Annie, Uncle Tom came to the house. He gave me two things. The first, untold wealth, a pound note and the second, a meteorite about the size of a fist. I was mesmerised to hold in my hand an object, which had come from "out there".

Aunt Vera (Aggie to Uncle Len) was a very keen photographer and once on a mission she was quite unstoppable. At the height of the Cold War she somehow got herself to Moscow and had a picture taken of herself alongside President Khrushchev. If you were short of time and saw her coming down the road towards you, you would be sure to cross over in the hope of escaping

My father was a member of Tring YMCA. Also a member and close friend was Edward Barber. They would swim together in Wilstone Reservoir, the largest of three reservoirs feeding the Grand Union Canal. There had been quite a few drownings when swimmers became trapped in the weeds. From the bank father watched as Barber, from within a bank of weeds, put a strand around his neck and called "I am a goner Frank", as he sank into the weed bed. He was submerged so long that father was indeed concerned that he may be trapped, and about to dive to the rescue, when Barber popped up yards away. Barber went on to win the Victoria Cross at Neuve Chapelle, Flanders on the 12th March 1915. The citation reads: "Private Barber ran in front of the grenade company to which he belonged, and threw bombs on the enemy with such effect that a very great number of them surrendered at once (my father said the number was twelve). When the grenade party reached Private Barber they found him alone and unsupported, with the enemy surrendering all about him". Later that same day,

saying, “what are those bastards up to?” he popped his head over the parapet and was shot between the eyes.

Aged about seven I was given a crystal radio and would marvel at the way a signal could be found after much searching of the crystal with the probe without the application of any power source.

When only eight or nine years old, we would walk down to Wilstone reservoir in mid-winter when there was a frost: a distance of two miles. In company with many others we would then skate on the reservoir prior to walking back home. It wouldn't happen today!