

ALBERT FIGG , MY Life in CHISELDON 1920-1929

I born in the last house at the bottom of Slipper Lane in 1920, my father was Thomas Figg, mother Minnie [nee. Streeter] they came from West Sussex, West Childington.

There was 11 in the family me being the youngest, the others being, Charlie, Michael,[Jack] Rose, Nellie, Tom, George, Minnie, Cissie, who died at an early age, Margaret, Dorothy, [Dolly],

I have so many happy memories of Chiseldon, Topsy Toe lane, Washbrook, where we use to paddle, Cow hill, and the walk with Dad, Mum & Dolly around the hill to the Plough pub, were we would sit outside with a packet of crisps and a glass of lemonade between the three of us on a Sunday summer evening.

The house is now beyond all recognition, I made a visit this year and the owner kindly allowed me and my daughter to look around, I knew it as a long house with a path running along the front of it, just one front door leading to the large kitchen, another room always known as the best room with the stairs going to the bedrooms, not sure how many, I know mine was overlooking the Water well, and of course there was Tom, George, Minnie, Margaret, &Dolly plus Dad &Mum, living here as well. The front room, had Dads desk, an incubator where chicks were hatched, the room was only used on high days & holidays [Sundays.] I always remember seeing little chicks in the incubator, it was a wonderful thing, to see them breaking the egg and then come out, there was no back garden, the house was dug into the bank, no trees or shrubs. On the left was a grass area opposite the front room, down the centre, a path, to the left a vegetable garden, at the end was the coal yard, Stable, Pig sty, &chicken shed, to the right, a bank, leading to a field, where I used to play, I remember climbing up the bank, cutting the back of my leg on the barbed wire falling down the bank which was full of stinging nettles and mother covering me with iodine, I looked like an Indian, Being so open we could see Cow hill from our door, and when we were playing there, Mother used to stand down in the yard and wave to us when it was time to come home, our place was enclosed by a fence and double gates to the yard and a single 4ft.one leading to the house.

It was sometime in 1918/19 Dad gave up his job as a farm manager in Bishopstone & bought a house at Slipper Lane Chiseldon, I have been unable to find out who he bought from, how much it cost, how did he raise the money, and whether the coal business was part of it or if Dad started it afterwards, I know his solicitors were Lemon &Co Swindon, they are still there, although they say it is too long ago to help me.

The first thing I can remember was when I was about 18months /2 years old, was being carried up a ladder to bed, I was told afterwards that Dad was building an extension on the end of the house, it was to be a clothes wash house with a copper boiler to boil the clothes and a toilet this was bucket under a seat, it being emptied each week and the contents buried in the garden [the sewage was not laid on until 1924/5, all this work was carried out by Irish navvies, I remember this being done, mother did not like me going out to see them, their foreman use to swear a lot, there is a little story[there are many more] but this one happened after the toilet was finished, next to our house was a public footpath which went up to the post office and the Wesleyan Chapel, and behind the house was I believe allotments, also a wooden shack where a man lived, I only knew him as Mark he always wore dark clothes, what happened was, it was late one night, Mother walked down to the toilet, it was very dark and all she had was a candle and some matches , the candle often blew out before she got there, she managed to get to toilet but the candle blew out, she got ready to sit down when somebody shouted out don't do it, she ran out shouting into the house screaming there is a man sitting on our toilet, my brother went to see who was there and found this man Mark sitting blind drunk. We have had a few laughs over the years. Now going from the house up Slipper Lane, there was the footpath, next was a stone built and thatch house it seems to have disappeared , what a shame, as Baker houses near the steps going to Cow hill, I remember the steps being built, so many places have gone since I was there, the history of Chiseldon, it is called moving forward, what is going to be next, the old houses in Turnball, Come on the people of Chiseldon stop this destruction of your heritage, sorry, but I do get very angry about things like this, The house which has now disappeared was occupied by Mrs Wright, she had a very large dog, I was very young at the time about 2/3 and I was running up

down the path in our garden when all of a sudden this dog jumped over the gate knocked me down and then sat on me I started screaming mum came running with a broom and drove it away, I have always been nervous of large dogs since, another instance was when I was about three, somebody bought me some sherbet, it was in round cardboard container wrapped in yellow paper with a piece hollow centre liquorice with which you would suck the sherbet out, after which you would eat the liquorice, inside of the container you find a little toy, in my case it was a small whistle, inside this was a small wheel which when you blew it would make a whistling noise , unfortunately as I blew and suck it the wheel came out and went down my throat, next thing I saw was mother pushing her fingers down my throat and pulling it out, and then she fainted, now every time I see children putting thing like that in their mouths I think of that whistle.

Carry on up the lane, houses on the left, the field on the right is now a housing site, in one house about half way up Mrs. Cox lived she was my school teacher at the infant school, she was very kind and generous person, just after the war I went back to Chiseldon and she was still living there not sure how old she was, must have been in her 80s I knock on her door, and before I speak she said I know you, you're a Figg, yes, I am, Albert, sorry to say I never met her again, near her lived Mr& Mrs Ash they had a daughter Betty, we used to play together, I think they moved away before we left,

On the right hand side of Slipper Lane and Topsy toe path were pig stys, opposite was a farm [now houses] I believe the farmer who owned it was a Mr. Whatley he also owned the farm on Cow hill, further up the lane was a shop own by Mr & Mrs. Miller she was tall and Mr Miller as I remember was much shorter, she always wore black and was very strict, Mr Miller was just the opposite, I always tried to make sure he served me, he always gave extra sweets, I was going to school at the time I must have been 5/6 and my playmate Alan Hope had the idea of going into the toilet and smoke, he use to supply the matches and I would get the orange paper that Jaffa orange was wrapped in, it was easy to get from the shop, but on one occasion I asked for cigarette paper, Mrs. Miller heard me, and said, who do you want them for, your brothers don't smoke, I think you better have some sweets, it was about a week later we was caught by Mrs Cox, I think she must have been told about me asking for the cigarette paper by Mrs. Miller , so that was the end of that little episode. Around the corner on Turnball Road was a baker & cake shop, when you went in the smell of the cakes and bread made your mouth water, I'm unable to remember who owned it, next to that was a row of cottages where the Archers furniture makers lived, Winnie Archer was a friend of my sister Dolly, further down the road was snob shop boot & shoe repairer I'm unable to remember his name, and then as you go down you come to the Post Office, a Mr Last owned that, I remember he was getting on in years and if the weather was good he would sit outside of the shop it was either in a chair or wheelchair, he was always very cheerful, he had one problem, he would wet himself. Now turn around and on the other side of the road a row of cottages where one of my school friends live by the name of Hicks I think his other name was Arthur, not sure, opposite these cottages was a field it had a large number of derelict steam engines and old farm equipment in it, we had many happy hours playing on them, it's now a housing site, then you have got Mays Lane going up to meet New Road, my sister Rose lived in the first cottage up some steps when married. I am not sure about this but I believe there was Blacksmith in Turnball, we carry on around the corner and the Patrick Arms Pub in front of you, just before that on the left is the infant school where I went, Mr & Mrs Hope were the caretakers and lived there with their son Alan. I called on them after the war, and, the same happened as with Mrs Cox, I walked up the steps and Mr Hope came to the door and ask what I wanted, I mentioned that I went to school here and knew Alan he called Mrs Hope and before I could say anything she said you're Albert Figg, come on in and have a cup of tea and some Christmas pudding, this was in the middle of the summer ,I shall never forget that, lovely lady, as was Mr Hope.

Opposite the Patrick Arms was a shop where the owners had a parrot they put outside in a cage and it wolf whistled at the girls and they would stop and look around to see who it was, and when the bus stopped outside it would make the noise of the bell and the driver if he did not know would drive off leaving people standing, also it could swear better than any man, the troops from the camp taught it, and make a noise like a cat and dog, it was quite funny to us kids, certainly taught us a lot of new words and of course we were told off if we

used them, but then, we did not know what they meant.

There was Soldiers camp up the end of Draycot road , first built in 1914,[see David Bailey s excellent book The Story Of Chiseldon Camp I,S,B,N. 0- 9534118-1-8 978-0-9534118-1-8 Chiseldon Local History Group[more about the camp later on]

I had many school friends, Alan Hope, Bob Curnick. George Peck. Arthur Hicks, Betty Shellabeer, and, a brother & sister who were both deaf and dumb their names were Wiggins and lived in Canny I always made the effort to go and find them when they came home on holidays from deaf & dumb school, I could always make them understand, others whose names I cannot remember. I met Betty some years after the war [ww2] and she showed me photos of the Chiseldon Carnival,, this was held each year and it was the highlight of the year. My brothers used to decorate our horse and coal cart, my sisters and I together with other children would ride on it around the village and then go to the playing field in Draycot Road, where all sorts of sports would be held, one that always fascinated me was push ball, this was a ball about twice the height of a man and it was sponsored by The News Of The World, the idea was that there was a team of men divided in into two they would go either side of the ball and push against each other and try to get off the ground and underneath it and hold it in the air, and those who could hold it the longest time was the winner, [that is how I remember it] and of course Tug of war, this was usually between pubs, and troops from the Camp, I also remember Coal Miners coming to the Camp, I think it was either during the General Strike of 1936 or after, they went to the Camp, it was then called the A.V.T.C.[Army Vocational Training Centre] they also joined in the games, from my recollection one died during the games.

Bear to left and you go along new road, not much there's only houses, turn left into Mays lane, if you go on further the big house on the left [unable to remember who owned it but now it is a hotel, a very good one as well according to my Daughter, next is the road to Canny, and then along you come to the turning back into Chiseldon , down this road along side of the Railway [built on now], past the field on your right where Dad kept two cows, and where a circus was held every year, [housing now] carry on down past the houses, and you come to the crossroads, opposite, the Elm Tree Pub , opposite that, was the Foundry, carry on down by houses on the right and down the bottom was Bakers cottages and the steps going up to Cow hill and the church.

Come Back and turn left you go up the hill with cottages on your left and what was known to us kids as the big school, Mr. Tatly was headmaster, as infants we were always scared of him when seen, as he always looked very stern, I never saw him smile, I was not looking forward to going to the big school. Carry on up the road you can turn right into Butts road leading to the cemetery, very scary at night and very dark, trees hung over the road, on the corner of Butts road is a large house, unable to remember the name but an elderly lady lived there.[more about her later,] turn left you go down to the Church, the Vicarage [the Ref. Waugh]more about him later, Whatleys Farm and then Cow hill, there is some wonderful old houses also there, I hope they are all listed as historic buildings it would be sacrilege to let them disappear.

Go back to the Elm tree and over the bridge, [now demolished including the railway] it was known as Beeching's reign of destruction of the railway in England, may he rot in hell, turn right this would take you to the station, and the goods yard, it was wonderful for us children, watching the big milk churns come in from the farms on horse and carts, there was one farmer who had a mule [a cross between a donkey and a horse, that caused a lot of fun, as if it decided not to move it would not matter what you tried, several ideas was suggested, one as I remember was light a piece of wood and put it under his tail, not sure if it was ever tried, the Churns were $\frac{3}{4}$ the height of a man, he would lean it on one side put his hand on the top and push it round and round until he reached the place where it would have to stand it until it was delivered to London, Swindon, etc. and then put into milk bottles for delivery to the houses,[later in life, aged 14/15 I was a delivery boy,] but in Highworth. I think I have covered most of what I remember of Chiseldon.

I now go back to my early days at Slipper lane again, I will try and not repeat myself but forgive me if I do, I wrote this many years ago, by hand, no idea about computers or Words process, I only learned how to operate a computer in 2005 and it is now 2008, and now I would not know what to do without it, Emailing, Scanning, and keeping up to date with my Web Site etc. and my ww2 veteran friends.

I started school when I was four, it was then I started to understand more of what was happening around me, first the coal being brought up from the station yard on a horse and cart and my brother Tom with the help of mum putting it into bags and then loading on the cart, and then Tom going out to deliver it, I was never allowed to get near the horse, cart or coal, the first time was when I was allowed to be on the cart was at the Carnival I then had my sisters and older children to keep an eye on me, but as I got older, I was allowed to go and play with my friends, in those days one could wonder almost anywhere for up to four hours at a time, being molested was unknown in those days, we would go birds nesting, but would only take one egg out of the nest, and if there was only one in we would wait until another was laid before taking it, I had quite a collection we would pierce the two end and blow the yoke out and then pack the shell in a box full of sawdust.

One other thing we would do is to walk along the railway line until we got to the golf links, and then go and find snakes, kill them and hang them up in the tree, not sure why, from there make our way to Cote Waters, that gives some idea how far we would go, it was unlikely that mother knew where we were, at times we would take sandwiches and a drink of orange, we were usually in a gang of four.

I saw very little of my Dad during the nine years I was at Chiseldon, he was a bricklayer and very good I understand, he built the lime kiln at Ogbourne St George, a house or bungalow on the right going down plough hill, sunk and built a well somewhere in Hodson, and he cycled everywhere, he also milked the cows twice a day so he was not a lazy man, but unfortunately he was a heavy drinker and spent most of the money in the Elm Tree, apparently coming home drunk, I was in bed when he went to work, and when he came home, this however left mum short of money, I was told later on by my sisters and brothers there was many a time he gave her nothing, my brother Tom run the coal business, he could only have been about fourteen, he was born around about 1907, that is what makes me think that Dad started the business after he moved to Slipper Lane, no doubt to help keep the family as well his drinking, he only paid Tom two shilling & sixpence a week, in 1925, Tom joined the Army, apparently he had been taking money for the coal from customers and putting it his pocket and Dad found out, so to protect Tom from a hiding when he came home Mum told him to go and sleep in the stable, when Dad got home from the pub he found Tom was not there, he took it out on Mum, according to my brothers and sisters this was not unusual, poor Mum, she tried to commit suicide twice, both times she was saved, once she was going to jump down the well, another time she was going to walk to Cote Waters to drown herself, it pains me to write this, however it was part of life.

George took over the coal delivering, he was only about 15, before that he was working for the farmer Mr Whatly, I was five then, I believed everything was going fine although I was told that coal was selling for one shilling & sixpence per. Cwt. For the best, one shilling for second grade. Then in 1926 the coal miners went on strike [stopped work] at this stage I will try and explain how this came about.

Before and after w.w.1, if you did not work you got no money, Women had no rights, no votes, and they were just servants, going out to work when they were 12/13. Most of them living at their place of work Mother was a butchers assistant but she lived at home so her money went to help the family, her Mother died at the age of 39 and already had 11 children, that was normal, some even had 15 as did one of my aunties, Mums father was a Rat catcher, and he used to like his drink.

I believe it was in the 1920's some miners decided to form a Union, this was a number of miners getting together and forming a committee and encouraging all miners to join, their aim was to improve the wages paid to miners, it was a dangerous work, and many men and boys were killed down the mines, their pay was a pittance, [as you can see from my comments] all the mines were owned by what was known as Coal Barons very wealthy people who were

getting richer by the minute at the expense of the miners, The government were either Liberals or Conservatives and most members were wealthy people and had shares in the mines, so it was against their interest to increase wages, so the union was declared illegal, but the union carried on under cover, but then all of a sudden the miners stopped work [1936] the Government thought by letting the miners carry on without money or food they would end the strike, but no, it spread, to the trains, so no coal was being moved around the country, factories stopped, Electricity stopped [there were very few houses with it anyway] gas, stopped, It then became known as the General Strike, not sure how long it went on for but eventually the government and the coal owners had to back down and over more pay to the miners but the owners had their own back by cutting the amount of miners required, their excuse was that there was not enough room to stack more coal, and there was plenty in stock, there was uproar, so it was decided by the government, I believe the Liberals, decided that the surplus miners should be trained for other work such as Farming, Builders, etc. this is when the miners came to Chiseldon Camp. It was then that Unions were allowed, the miners became known as the N.U. M. National Union of miners, this followed other unions being formed of which we have at present,

It was due to the N.U. M. that the Labour Party was formed, the idea was to help the ordinary worker to have their say in how the country should be run [not sure it has always worked.] now the women wanted their right to vote, but they went at it in a different way, In ww1 the government called on women to work in factories etc to make up for the men who had to go into the forces, they also wanted married women as well, but this caused a problem, some had children, they were encouraged to go to school at a early age, It was then women started to get together, it was not a union as such, almost like the present day Mothers Union, a Mrs Pankhurst was a leading figure in this, the idea was they would encourage more women to work if the Government promises to give the women the vote after the war, this they did, but when the war finished in 1918 the government of the day did not keep their promise, and so, the women began to be known as the Suffragettes, through Mrs Pankhurst, the organization gathered strength across the country whereby hundreds joined in disobedience to the government, police, etc. and chaining themselves to anything they knew would hinder the government and police in doing their work this went on for quite a long time to the cheers of some people and to the annoyance of the men who thought that women should be seen and not heard and do as they were told. Eventually Women got the vote. I am not sure what year this happened, a railway truck loaded with animal food came into Chiseldon station yard, and apparently Dad and his drinking partners discussed the idea of opening the truck and stealing some of its contents, this would help feed their horses etc. so that night they got their sacks, filled them up and away they went, but unknown to Dad his sack had a hole in it, and as he made his way up the bank to the house it left a trail, next day the police followed it and then arrested Dad, he was charged with theft, and was sentenced to prison, not sure where he went or how long, as I have said before I never saw him much, so I cannot say I missed him, but of course Mother was getting no money, however my brother Charlie who was working in London sent some when he could, and some of the coal money was used, which in turn made it difficult to pay the coal supplier [Read & son] during this time the local council asked for prices from several people with horse & carts to collect household rubbish, with the help of Charlie, George put in a price and got the contract, but it took the council three months before the first payment was made which did not help very much, it was then that Mother had to find something to do so as to keep food on the table etc.

First, she got a job cleaning the two chapels, Methodist and Wesleyan, every week, she then started to go out at night and sit with people who were dying, lay them out ready for the funeral, that meant washing them and dressing before going into the coffin the coffin was usually laid on the table where people could come and pay their respects by laying their hand on their forehead and saying, God bless. I remember going with Mother to an old ladies house before she died and she said Albert look after your mother, you only ever have one she died soon afterwards, mum took me to see her in her coffin and told me touch her and say God Bless. The next thing was two horses and a cart with two soldiers, came to the house loaded with large bundles of dirty washing from officers at the camp, These were piled up along the path, mother had to wash it, starch the collars, and iron every thing ready to be pick up the following Monday when another lot would come. She would have to get up about five o'clock get the water out of the well with a bucket and a

rope on it let it down and then wind it up using a handle and a roller which the rope went around, carry the water to the copper boiler and then lift it up and tip it into it, she would have to do this about ten times, then find some wood and light the fire, after that she would call George and the older children Minnie, Margaret, and Dolly, they would get the breakfast ready then call me, after which we would all get ready for school with Dolly looking after me, making sure I washed behind my ears and neck, something I always hated, in the mean time Mum would go down to the yard and help George bag the coal and help him load it on the cart, God only knows how she kept this up. Bless her, she was a wonderful mother, I know now why she tried to commit suicide, although I only found out many years afterwards, I never mention it to her neither did I bring the subject about Dad, It was whilst she was sitting with a dying lady in the house on the corner of Butts Road she collapsed and rushed to Savanake Hospital with a burst Duodenal Ulcer, I remember going to see her laying in bed looking very pale, but the thing stands out in my mind is seeing a Deer poking its head through the window, Savanake forest was full of them, This reminds me, every Sunday we would have to go to Sunday school Methodist in the morning and Weslyn afternoon, and one of our treats every year was to go to Savanake Forest, take sandwiches, Oranges drink play games, look for wildlife, we had a great time, no idea why Dad insisted we go to Sunday school, he would not allow any one to read a paper, do any washing of clothes, knitting, or sewing on Sundays he never went to Chapel or Church, the pub was his only interest.

It was 1926/7 I was given the job of sitting on the back of the coal cart when George was delivering coal to the Camp on Saturdays, this was because when George took a bag to one of the Huts some of the troops used to steal one, the idea was if I sat there I could watch and see it didn't happen, that was alright for a while until the troops thought up a trick, what happened, one soldier would come around the back of the cart and talk and give me some sweets, in that way it took my attention away from the coal and another soldier would take a bag without me knowing, George found out what was going on and made me sit up in the front looking down the cart where I could see all the coal and what was going on. It was on one of these times I was sitting on the cart when there was a tremendous noise coming from the air, it was during the time when people in black was walking around with two boards hanging around their neck one in front and one on their back with words saying the end of the world is near, because of this I thought this was happening and I cried, I wanted my mum, and as I sat there the noise got louder & louder, then looking up I saw what look like a big silver object coming towards me and as it came over me I saw a big basket hanging underneath it and people waving, it turned out to be the R 101 Airship, apparently it was on its trial run, unfortunately it crashed later on with a lot of casualties.

It was in 1927 George decided he had enough with Dad and the wages he was getting, the council contract was proving successful and Dad had promised to pay him more, but he refused too, so off he went and joined the Army, that left Dad with a problem, he had to get a man in to do the work that meant he had to pay more, It was not long before he found himself in financial difficulties, in 1929 he had to sell up, I was told he only had £50 left when we moved to Fernham, nr Farringdon Berkshire to work as a farm labourer.

There is one more little story I must tell, it happened before we left Chiseldon, at the weekend the workman would take the horse on the Saturday over cow hill to a field so it could graze. The workman would call Mother to help on to the horses back to ride it, this time however it must have felt it wasn't fair after working all he week to have to carry someone, so when Mother bent down to give him a leg up the horse turn his head around and bit her Bum, she had a job to sit down for several days. Not sure if the marks were still there when she died in 1957. My Mother was such a kind, loving, and generous person, she suffered so much as did other women before her, thank goodness times have changed, as much as I hate wars, it has brought some change for the better.

The people I have strong memories of are; The Rev Waugh, he was kind, funny, and very generous, he always had sweets in his pocket, and he use to hide some of them in holes in the walls, for us to find, and as kids we would always run after him to try and get to him before the others, he also had an impediment, every now and again he would open his mouth very wide, and then carry on walking, he often use to go and see my Mother when people were dying so that she could go and sit with them, he always said to mum if her stockings were

loose, I see the cows have gone to grass, I still can not see what that has to do with cows.
The others were Ben Wellard he had a withered arm, also his brother, Erick, & George Miller,
they were all friends of my brothers.