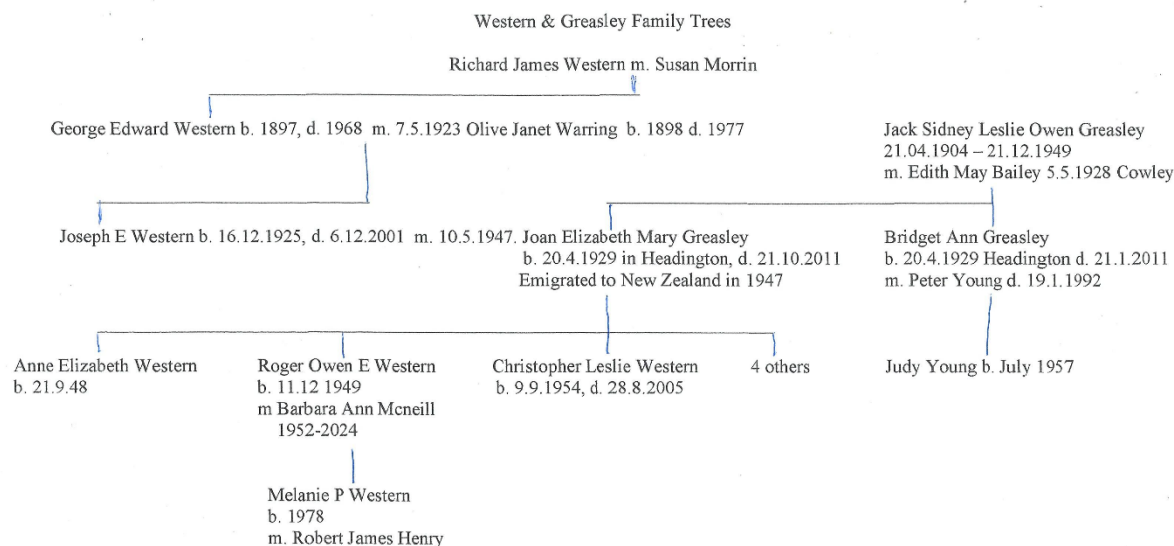


2869 Recollections of Wheatley by Joan Western

Sourced from Melanie nee Western

Background

Relevant family tree



Before emigrating to New Zealand in 1947, Joan Greasley lived with her parents fleetingly in Wheatley, renting rooms in The Kings Arms (and, so is stated, in a house annexed to it), and then living, it is believed, in Mott House, 86 High Street. This has been confirmed by Wheatley archive personnel based on one photo of two ladies in the garden with a building in the background of the adjacent property which shows a rear extension identical to that of Greystones, 88 High Street.

Extract of recollections sent by Melanie

While still very young, Joan recalls moving back to the Kings Arms, this time to a house annexed to the Kings Arms. It had a living room with a fireplace, and a tiny kitchen with a kerosene stove. The living room had a door leading to a staircase with two bedrooms at the top. One was for her parents, and the other was for Joan and Bunty when she was old enough. They had electric lights upstairs and lamps downstairs. Joan recalled having the measles while living there, and her mother shading the light with a cloth so when it was switched on it did not hurt her eyes. They had curtains to shade the bright outdoor light during the day, and an owl shaped, night light at bedtime.

Opposite the Kings Arms was an acreage of land (this inn had been a stopping place for horse drawn carriages travelling from Oxford to London). The large old stables were still there, along with big sheds for wagons etc and also disused pig sties with little brick-concrete yards, enclosed with walls and a gate. They had a roof and were perfectly clean except for dry, dusty leaves. Joan and her sister played house here, using boxes for furniture and bits of old china and vases with wildflowers.

A wide path went down to the back of the place and here was a little running stream, with a wee bridge, perfect for playing “Pooh sticks” (from Winnie the Pooh). Each child chose a suitable twig, and then they dropped them at the same time into the water. Then they raced across the bridge and watched and waited to see whose twig got there first. One day Joan's Aunt Florence and cousin John were visiting, so the children went off to play by the stream.

John somehow fell in, getting very wet. Joan had to drag him home crying and snivelling to his mother. Joan's mother blamed her, and she got scolded. Joan was upset, but she was not sorry because privately she thought John was very silly.

When Joan turned five, her mother took her to the infant school about one kilometre away. The youngest students were in the first room with a cosy open fireplace and had a lovely teacher called Mrs Flood. When anyone asked how old she was, she would say she was 100! Joan loved being read books by her parents, her favourites were Winnie the Pooh, Wind in the Willows and Beatrix Potter, and the fairy tales and nursery rhymes that featured the English countryside, so charming for little children. Her next teacher was Mrs Wren, and Joan thought she was horrible, and so she behaved rather badly. Perhaps it was because she was learning so quickly. Anyway, her teachers decided she should be progressed to primary school, and it was here that she finally settled down and began to enjoy learning. Joan received certificates for her good work in writing.

Around the time she turned 9, the family moved to a house of their own on High Street (following research by the Wheatley archivist, this is believed to have been Mott House, 86 High Street). They had 2 bedrooms, but no bathroom. The sitting room had a fireplace and they only used this room on Sundays or other special occasions. The rooms were quite large compared to what they had been used to. The living room had a brick floor which was red, and her mother polished it every week with a special red polish called "Cardinal". When she was older, Joan loved to do it, making the floor clean and shining. On one side of the fireplace there was a built-in dresser where mother kept their dinner set. It was white with a yellow border. Opposite this was a sideboard on which stood the radio. On the other wall was the dining table and chairs. Joan hated the kitchen. It had a larger copper built into the corner for boiling up sheets and towels and underwear, and a horrible stone sink, and gas stove. At least they were improving their cooking arrangements. They had a table with a wooden top which was used as a work bench for preparing food. In winter they ate their breakfast here with the gas oven switched on and its door open to keep them warm. All of their pots and pans, tinned food, the dry goods like tea, preserves, jam etc were kept in the pantry, under the stairs. Enamel bowls were used for washing dishes, clothes and themselves. The toilet was down the end of the garden. It was a flushing toilet but it had no plumbing, so they had to fill a bucket of water from the tap outside the house and carry it with them. One side of the house was joined to the one next door, and the other side had a path leading to the road, with a gate. The girls took their bicycles out this way.

In the backyard, there was a big plum tree. Unfortunately, many trees in the area were infested with "silver leaf" which caused them to die off. Everyone who had an affected tree had to officially cut it down. So, Joan's father cut theirs down with a hand saw. The remains were dragged down to the stone shed at the bottom of the garden and proved to be useful for firewood. Joan and Bunty used this shed in their games. Their father grew some potatoes and runner beans in their little garden, and Joan tried to grow some flowers, though not so successfully.

On weekends, Joan and her family would often go walking. Coombe Wood was her favourite, especially in springtime. First, they went up Ladder Hill. Beyond this was a steep grass-covered rubble bank. Then through the gateway signed "No trespassers", which evidently did not apply to locals who came to enjoy the scenery. The wild cherry trees were first to bloom, and these had white flowers. Then came the purple violets, pink primroses with a lovely, sweet scent, then bluebells like a lake of blue between the trees. Down by a little stream were wild white

anemones (wind flowers) and king cups (marsh marigolds) - their big golden flowers shining in the sun. The little stream trickled over small pebbles and the water was so clear you could see tiny newts (like little lizards) swimming about. Joan and her sister, and their friends sometimes caught them to look at because they were so interesting. They always put them back though. It was here that Joan first came to love flowers, and plants and trees, and nature. She was an English Rose at heart.

Joan remembers a simple game they used to play close to home. When a train was approaching, they would lean over the railway bridge. As the train picked up speed, clouds of steam poured from the engine, swirling all around the children. Alongside the bridge was the 'up-rail' to London. Next to the road was a long steep set of steps with a big, rounded metal handrail. The children pretended to send messages from one end to the other like it was a telephone line. Next to the steps was a sloping stack of oak logs which had been sawn by a timber company and left there to season. This was the most dangerous game they came up with - climbing down the slope on those very large logs. If one had started to roll, they would have all gone and a child could have easily been crushed. Joan also loved to ride her bike down Ladder Hill at top speed, with her hands and her feet on the handlebars. As she got near the bottom she slowed down and arrived safely, swooping over the railway bridge.

The children had named another favourite place "Fairyland", which was an old quarry where they used to get lime etc for making bricks. Now it was abandoned, and the ground was covered in little rough grass covered bumps that they could sit on, with hollows in between that looked like tiny lakes, for paddling in. Little harebells grew there, and small trees, and the children thought it was lovely. Joan felt lucky that her parents took her to such places.

The walk to Holton was another one they enjoyed. They walked through the village with its large pond full of ducks. On the way they passed the 'witch's house', which was rather a tumble-down thatched cottage that looked very spooky. Returning home a different way, they passed a field that in spring would be covered in cowslips. The girls picked them in bunches to take home to their mother. The ground was rather soft and damp, which was good for cowslips but not for much else. The fields had hedges and there was always lots of honeysuckle and wild roses.

In 1939 when Joan turned 10, war was declared against Germany. As time progressed and England became increasingly at risk, everyone was issued with gas masks, in case poisonous gas was dispersed from air attacks. They came in a cardboard box, which had a strap to go over one's shoulder. Everyone was ordered to carry their masks at all times, in case they needed to be used.

Rationing was still in full force and any food they grew was badly needed. There was very little meat and even milk was scarce, though Joan's family had extra portions because her father had a duodenal ulcer and it was supposed to be beneficial for him. Housewives joined in any shop queue they could find, in the hopes of finding something that was not normally available. All bread was wholemeal. There were no sweets or chocolate, or bananas or even oranges because merchant ships could not risk bringing in fruit, without becoming a target. Although somehow orange juice was available so babies could get the vitamins they needed. The health of the English people was the best it had every been because no one could eat too much, especially unhealthy food like sugar and starch and white bread. The family shopped at Mr Green's grocery store on the corner of the street. He had a wooden board with a wire attached to a handle. That was how he cut up the small cheese rations. Fish was not rationed, or vegetables.

The fishing fleets must have taken great risks going to sea during wartime.

The year Joan turned 10, they had a terrible Christmas day. They had been sent a turkey by rail by Aunt Edna - gutted but still covered in feathers, with the legs cable tied together. Her mother plucked it and roasted it, and it looked delicious. But just as her father was about to carve it, he suddenly fell to the floor, groaning and crying out in agony. Her mother rushed across to the Harris's to phone the doctor, and then her father was taken to the hospital in Mr Harris's car. It turned out his duodenal ulcer had ruptured, and he needed an operation. In the meantime, Mrs Harris gave Bunty and Joan some of their Christmas dinner with an extra sixpence in the Christmas pudding. They were very good people.

While Joan's poor father slowly recovered in hospital, someone stole the gold pocket watch he had been given by his father. And then one day when Joan came home from school her mother said "I have a surprise for you! Your father is home, but be careful, don't jump all over him or you will hurt him." Joan was very careful and gave him a soft hug and kiss. She cried to see him looking so ill, even if he was on the mend. He was a wonderful father.

Joan's parents did not attend church, but the girls had been baptised in a Catholic Church. Joan started going with her friend Jennifer to an Anglican church. She enjoyed the service, but did not take communion because she had not been confirmed. She remembered one lovely Sunday walking with her father, while her mother rested. It was summertime and they came across a place with lots of beautiful water lilies. They were large wild ones, that were a shining yellow colour. Along the bank was groups of yellow bearded irises, and weeping willows, just like a scene from *The Wind in the Willows*.

The family had a pure white cat who was deaf. One day Joan's father brought home a black terrier puppy. Joan called it Scuttles after the black coal scuttle. As she got older, Joan took her dog for walks on her own. She avoided the waste land where the gypsies sometimes camped. She was afraid they might kidnap her, which was of course very silly. Her mother said she read too much. Anyway, they might have taken her dog, and that would have been terrible!

Joan remembered a certain children's party she had been invited to where her mother made a pretty white dress, cut down from one of her own. While playing a silly party game that involved kneeling on a rug while other children pulled the rug away Joan managed to fall flat on her face and fracture her nose. Blood went everywhere, ruining her pretty new frock. The Doctor straightened her nose out and covered it with plaster, but she still ended up with a crooked nose. Another unfortunate fancy dress party came to mind. Her mother decided to make her a costume using strips of coloured crepe paper arranged to look like a rainbow, which were to be fastened to her wrists. But Joan refused to wear it, thinking she would look ridiculous. She would not hold her arms and put on the decorations, and her mother was very disappointed. Only later did Joan realise how awful she had been.

Every spring, Joan's mother cleaned the house and had the living room walls painted a soft green colour. The furniture and doors were given a special polish and the bricks made sparkly red, and the dishes on the sideboard were shining. It looked very cosy and comfortable. They were poor, but clean and happy.

When Joan turned 11, she was supposed to learn to sew a dress at school. She had some pretty pale green material bought by her mother. But Joan hated sewing and had to unpick her work so many times that she never did finish the dress, and left the whole mess behind her when she

finished with primary school. From there, her grandfather paid for her to go to a private girl's school in Oxford. It was called Millham Ford, and Joan travelled there by bus. The girls wore a uniform, with a felt hat in winter, and a straw boater in summer (which Joan hated).

At age 14, Joan's grandfather died, and she had to leave the school because there was no more money to send her. She was glad to leave, because she was no academic star. But now she must find a job. At the time, her mother was working near the village, at the Bishop of Oxford's Palace (which was actually a manor house) for a trust company. The name of the trust was "Queen Anne's Bounty". They had come to Oxfordshire to escape the bombing in London. The staff lived in the house, or boarded in the village, or rented houses close by. The ground floor was all offices. The exterior of the house was very attractive, possibly Georgian, with ornate windows and doors. Across the front was a huge wisteria, which had magnificent purple flowers in summer. There were also many holly trees, and in the winter, they were able to pick the berries for Christmas decorations.

Joan's mother asked the manager if there was a place for Joan, and after a short interview she was given a job which mostly involved writing down details on cards. The Bounty sponsored clergymen for certain things they needed money for, and all details of purchases were entered on these cards and filed. Joan found the work simple, and she was neat and orderly and so she got on well enough. She and her mother biked to work in all weather, except snowstorms. First, they went over the railway bridge, and then up Ladder Hill. It was very, very steep and Joan had a job getting up on it on her bike, and her mother had to walk the last bit. Her father also biked to work in Cowley which was about 4 miles away. He was still at Morris Motors building trucks etc. for the army and repairing planes. There was a huge dump nearby filled with crashed planes. Possibly the steelworks opposite recycled the metal. These factories employed many men, with huge numbers coming out of the gates at knock-off time.

Outside at night it would be very dark, with no traffic, streetlights, or lights showing behind the black-out curtains. If anyone had even a chink of light showing, an Air Raid Precaution (ARP) man would bang on the door and shout 'put out that light!' That never happened to Joan's family. They had a tiny torch, which could only be used if you tripped or had to find your way around obstacles. It was quite spooky at first, but they soon got used to it. In the dark, they could hear bats giving out little squeaks as they awakened from hanging asleep in the trees all day, to hunting little insects at night. They were harmless and quite small – about the size of a fantail without a tail. But some of the village women would scream if they came close, worried they would get into their hair.

Oxford and the surrounding area were never bombed, despite their being two big factories doing war work – making vehicles for the army and steel for planes etc. There was also a large aerodrome on the other side of Oxford. It was thought that there were too many Germans in Oxford – professors and scientists and the university. Luckily the beautiful old buildings of Oxford were not damaged at all.

Wheatley, however, was sort of bombed. A German plane – a straggler, was limping home still carrying a bomb. The crew must have been flying low and saw the railway line. It may have had wounded aboard – hit by shells from 'ack ack' guns firing at them where the bombing was taking place. The plane was obviously in bad shape because the bomb fell into a field about 8 metres from the railway line with a huge thump and a loud explosion. The plane was spotted straight away, and the sirens went off. Joan's family heard the plane and the explosion, and her father got them all downstairs, under the table. Shortly after, the all-clear siren sounded, and

they returned to bed. The next day, everyone who was able to, went to look at the enormous crater. Just as well no stock had been in the field at the time as they would have been terrified by the bomb.