

First recollections of Toddington in 1942 by Alan Higgs

The early war years must have been tough but I remember a super childhood in Chiltern Road, Dunstable, probably because I knew no different. We kept chickens, rabbits and grew all our own veg.

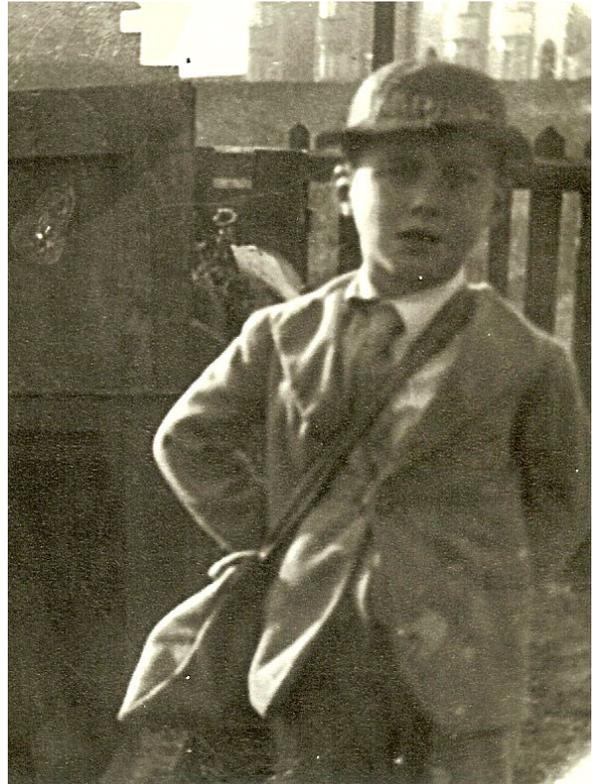
Mum and dad used to go old time dancing some Saturdays, These occurred in surrounding villages, Toddington being one of them where the music was supplied by the Bill Greengrass Band.

In 1942 Bill's drummer, Alan Eldred, was called up to the Army and as my father used to play drums Bill asked him to step in until such time as Alan was demobbed.

The band was Bill Greengrass on banjo/mandolin, his wife Doris on piano and Alan Eldred on Drums. Dad knew the entire repertoire from attending the dances but had to go to Toddington Sunday mornings to rehearse and practice and I was fortunate enough to go with him on his Norton 350 motorcycle and sidecar. Bill and Doris Greengrass had a greengrocers shop, at 16 High Street, just a six doors from where I now live. It was where the dry cleaners used to be and I well re-member being fascinated by the rehearsals at Toddington. I used to sit upstairs in the front window and remember thinking how massive Toddington High Street was looking out across it from upstairs to the pond. It was unmade up in those days and just seemed such a wide road.

It was serious business rehearsing that repertoire and I could be seen and not heard and I suppose I was taken by it and behaved.

It was on about my third visit when Bill Greengrass said "You like that drumming, don't you Alan? You have been so good I have something for you" and presented me with a drum, (a tom-tom) and a pair of sticks. I was away! .. totally mad keen drummer!



Me about that time with my gas mask and ARP wardens hat

Later I was allowed to attend dances for just the early part; and what jovial events they were ! Most popular dances were the Veleta (waltz), St Bernards Waltz, Military Two Step, Boston Two Step, Barn Dance, Square Tango, Dashing White Sergeant, Palais Glide, and the Gay Gordons and in each half they would have a set dance for teams of 8 people like the Lancers, Caledonians or Quadrilles.

Some dances were made progressive, where you moved on to the next partner at a set time, so when you stepped out in the Barn Dance you diagonally moved on to the next partner so you ended up having a small dance and introduction to all the ladies there.

All the dances were sequenced so the music had to be spot on, keeping time with 16 bar or 32 bar dances or in the case of set dances like the Lancers, many more bars.

Every dance had an MC, master of ceremonies, who led each dance with his partner for one or two sequences before the remainder of dancers came on the floor.

It was grand times with most dancers singing to the old tunes whilst dancing. Old fashioned manners prevailed where men bowed and ladies curtsied to each other after each dance and you always linked your ladies arm and escorted her back to her seat after a dance.

Such was the popularity of old time dancing that it featured regularly on the radio; Harry Davidson's Old Time Band, Sydney Thomson's Band in "Take your Partners" and in "Time for Old Time" it was the Sidney Bowman Band.

Well this little drum and sticks I received in Toddington possibly changed my life, I did drum, and as my uncle Percy, in Canada, had also been a drummer, he retrieved his Ludwig Drum Set from his attic, put it in a huge packing case and shipped it to me in England by sea. Eight weeks of anxious waiting for me saw this packing case arrive from Dunstable North railway station by horse and cart to my house in Clifton Road in 1948



Alan Eldred drums, Bill Greengrass Banjo with Doris Greengrass on piano. Officially named the Gaiety Players but more commonly named Greengrass and the Grasshoppers

I had also joined the Army Cadets at Dunstable Grammar School and played drums in their Drum and Bugle Band. We had the honour of playing at half time for the Schoolboys International at Luton Town Football ground in 1948. I'm the tiny drummer in the centre in front of the big bass drum.





The Davalan Trio, Dunstable Town Hall, June 30th 1951

I persevered and formed a band with a school mate Allan Riding and another chap who had left, Dave Bradley. I was fortunate to perform my first paid gig at Dunstable Town Hall on 30th June 1951. We got 30/- (£1-50) each which was a huge amount for me aged 16 and still at school.

Of course we were playing an Old Time Dance !

But we soon augmented into modern dance



9th January 1953, modern dance at the Warden Tavern



Halfway House resident band in 1961

I never looked back and had a wonderful career as a semi professional dance band/jazz drummer. Gigging evenings and working full time provided funding me to get onto the house market very early: I even bought a house before I got married to Carole in 1961.

So visiting Toddington in 1942 had a major bearing on my life in my opinion and of course it was fantastic to finally get back living here in 1993 .. Alan Higgs (2011) (revised 2014)