

Three of the First Hundred



Eileen Cobb as a child sitting on the lap of her father Alfred Downer. Also from left to right are her grandmother Emma Witpen, great-uncle Philip Watling and great-aunt Flora. Her grandfather William Witpen sits on the right of his granddaughter.

The last issue of Suburb News described how Eileen Cobb's parents met in 1908 when they moved as children into newly-built cottages at 10 and 11 Asmunds Hill.

Eileen Cobb's grandparents and great-uncle were among the 'First Hundred' to move to the Suburb nearly 100 years ago. They rented cottages in Asmunds Hill through Hampstead Tenants, part of the Co-Partnership Housing scheme which encouraged building healthy homes on a commercial basis. Turn of the century housing for London's working classes was often unhygienic and overcrowded, even for those who earned a reasonable wage.

The land was owned by the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust but Hampstead Tenants built the homes. For an investment of £5,

increasing to £10, the tenants received interest of 5% a year and an accrued dividend set against their rent which, it was claimed at the time, would make their homes virtually rent-free. Rents ranged from 6s (30p) to 15s (75p) a week.

Eileen's maternal grandfather William Witpen chose the Show House at 10 Asmunds Hill as it had a sunny aspect at both the front and back.

William's brother Charles Witpen, first heard about the proposed Garden Suburb and said to his brother: "They are building a Suburb over Hampstead way. Are you coming, Bill?" William and his family took a train to Hampstead Heath Station and walked across the Heath. The Hampstead Tenants' leaflet advised visitors to take the North London Railway from Broad

Street and pass Wyldes Farm: "a two mile walk – if fine, this is a charming walk."

William and his family witnessed Henrietta Barnett cut the first sod on 2 May 1907 on the land which is now 140-142 Hampstead Way. A month later on 5 June, the brothers laid foundation bricks carved with their own initials at the same location. Their initials and those of the other first hundred members (both tenants and investors) can still be seen today at the cottages.

Charles moved into 2 Asmunds Hill with his wife, Bessie, in 1908. Unfortunately the Jelk's furniture van got stuck in mud and did not arrive until the next day but kindly neighbours lent them blankets and pillows overnight. They were also one of the first families to move out of the Suburb, buying a house designed for them in Arkley during the early 1930s.

Eileen's paternal grandfather, Arthur Downer, a civil servant who also played clarinet in an orchestra, moved into 11 Asmunds Hill with his wife Rose and three children, Alfred (Eileen's father), Joe and Valerie. They attended the Free Church. Joe tried to run off to sea but was brought back by his father. He did eventually join the Navy but died during World War II when his ship the Curacoa, an anti-aircraft cruiser, was cut in half by the Queen Mary which it was trying to protect. His ship went down and, although he was a strong swimmer, the Queen Mary did not pick up survivors in wartime.

A few months later in 1908 William with his wife Emma moved to 10 Asmunds Hill. His daughter Lilian (Eileen's mother)

who was then 12 years old, his sister Flora and Granny (from Godalming) arrived a week earlier in a 4-wheel cab known as a Growler, to stay at No. 2 while he and Emma packed. They watched St Jude's being built and later attended packed services often relayed outside.

William Witpen was a senior clerk at the Samuel Jones Butterfly Brand Company which made transparent and coloured sticky paper. He and his brother Charles were skilled wood carvers. William made much of his own furniture as well as a one-string fiddle from a cigar box and a 'Cat's Whisker' radio when the BBC began broadcasting. He rode a penny farthing bicycle. He would play mandolin accompanying Lilian while she practised on the piano. He also mended all the family's shoes which frequently wore thin from much walking.

Two fruit trees donated by Henrietta Barnett were planted in the gardens of over 200 new cottages and William's family made wine from the apple and pear trees in their garden. Gifts of plants from Queen Mary from the Royal Garden at Windsor were also divided among the first homesteads.

Errata: In the previous article about Eileen's family (Suburb News Spring 06), Eileen was 35 years when she married and not 36. It was the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII who abdicated, who crashed the car her father helped make, and Mesopotamia was known as 'Mespot'. Her father practised organ at both St Jude's and the Free Church but it was at the Free Church that he raised the alarm when some suffragettes tried to burn it down.

10 Asmunds Hill on TV

10 Asmunds Hill will feature on TV in the 'Hidden House History' series at 8pm on Tuesday 21 November on UK History Freeview channel 12, Cable and Sky; also the next day at 1pm.

Current occupiers of 10 Asmunds Hill are Mireille Herbert, her partner Eddie and young daughter Abbey, aged 1½ years, who will also feature in the TV story. Mireille's grandmother, Vera Sutton, bought No. 10 in 1972 and although Mireille was brought up in France, she spent her school holidays on the Suburb and continued to live there until now, apart from occasional breaks. Her mother owns the house.

Mireille and her family attend the Free Church and enjoy living as part of the community. "I know about half the road and always bump into people I know in Temple Fortune," says Mireille who leads a palliative care team for the NHS advising GPs and nurses. "I remember my grandmother chatting to her neighbours over the hedge."

"My grandparents had been renting a house in Rotherwick Road but it was too big and expensive to buy so they found the cottage in Asmunds Hill. I had a very close relationship with my grandmother. My grandfather was a violinist and No 10 has retained

a musical thread through its inhabitants. The original occupiers owned a piano and there was one in this house as my mother is a pianist. Eddie plays the guitar and sings and leads music-time for the parent and toddler group every Wednesday morning at the Free Church.

Mireille Herbert, partner Eddie and daughter Abbey sitting in the garden of 10 Asmunds Hill.



"It was exciting taking part in the TV programme and I loved meeting Eileen Cobb who had not visited the house since she was about six years old."

Micky Watkins from the HGS Archive was also involved in the film and describes the impact made by Henrietta Barnett.

Edith's 93 years of



'dressing up'. This was a favourite pastime of Ediths along with her friends Doris Mitchell and Molly McKenzie, both of whom lived in Asmunds Place. They used the arches between the houses as backdrops for plays; using clothes-horses to prop up scenery and their parents' clothes for costumes. As far as Edith can recall no-one ever came to watch these plays!

Fancy dress was always a feature of local celebrations. These might take place at Easter time or Empire day. The children would dress up and be paraded around on the back of a horse and cart. Similarly, people were proud of their Suburb and model houses were made and paraded on carts for all to see.

Edith attended Child's Way school walking along a grassy path over waste ground to get there. Edith always said she disliked school apart from the sport and PT lessons, and a kindly headmistress, Miss Lyon, who would allow her to tidy cupboards rather than go in to assembly. School sports days and festival days, held on Willifield Green, were a source of great fun and Edith has medals she won in 1924.

The building supplies depot at Enfield had to be visited at least twice a week to collect wood and plaster for Walter's work, so the young Edith liked to ride on the 'truck' which was pushed along a grassy path to Enfield. Hedges and the occasional cottage was all that could be seen. The journey back had to be on foot because the 'truck' was full – all this before the North Circular was considered.

Her teenage years were spent at school in Mornington Crescent,

Edith was born in Mill Hill on January 29, 1910 and moved to 19 Asmunds Place in 1913 at the age of three. Apart from a short time during WWII, she was to live there for the next 93 years.

Edith's father, Walter Cannon, was a painter and decorator and her mother, Rosa Louisa, a Norfolk girl who had come to work in Middlesex. Edith had one older sister, Kate.

One of Edith's early memories is the lights and fires from the Zeppelins which bombed London during WWI and which could be seen from Asmunds Place. She readily recalled the fear and consternation caused among the young family. Her father helped to grow vegetables on the greens at the top of Asmunds Place as part of the war effort and he became a part-time fireman during WWI. Walter was to repeat both these activities during WWII.

Happier, early memories of Edith's childhood are all about



Eileen Cobb with presenter Nick Barrett who interviewed her for two hours for the half-hour programme. Also shown is Sam Wagstaff, the producer.

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