

The Dower House, Pembury, Kent (1956 to 1967)

My name is Peter George Lush and I lived at the Dower House from 1956 for ten years. In 1956 the building was taken over by the Army as Headquarters for the 133 (Kent and Sussex) Infantry Brigade Territorial Army. My father, Ernest Edward Lush (Ernie or Ern), became caretaker and we moved into a flat on the second floor. Prior to the Army taking over the building it was occupied by an elderly lady and her son who then moved into a smaller house at the end of the driveway.

At that time the road which ran past the end of the drive was the A21, no bypass's then, and at the T junction at the top of the hill, Woodsgate Corner, there was a Texaco garage called Woodsgate Garage, where I served petrol on a part time basis for several years. The driveway which led to what was then the front of the building was very narrow with overhanging trees and bushes. Between the Dower house gardens and the Woodsgate garage there was a footpath through the woods which led firstly to the village playing fields then on toward Lower Green and our school. To the right of the petrol station and garage, toward the village, there was an outdoor swimming pool which we swam at regularly in the summer.

I'm not sure that my father was the first army caretaker there. As little boy, I would have been ten then, I seem to remember hearing of a previous caretaker who had not held the post long as he had a drink problem. Caretakers on Army premises then were normally retired soldiers who had served their full term of 22 years and were receiving a military pension. My father would seem then to be a strange choice as he had served in the Merchant Service in the 1930's straight from school and then again during the second world war, hated soldiers who he commonly referred to with distaste as 'Pongo's', and saw any form of military discipline as ridiculous. Prior to moving to the Dower House we had lived in a prefab in Ringden Meadow, Paddock Wood and he had operated a small bus company. Around this time he had lost his main contract and had fallen on hard times but I think he saw the move to Pembury as a temporary thing as he tried to turn his business around.

In any event from the outset my mother, Margaret Isobel Lush (Peggy or Peg), undertook most of the caretaking duties. Later when we were well established at the Dower House and it began to be seen as more acceptable for a woman to be in the role she became caretaker in her own right. Caretakers pay was poor so an additional form of income, pension or part time job would be needed, but the benefit for us was the live in accommodation.

Our second floor flat comprised a kitchen, at the right hand end facing the building from the front, with bathroom and toilet behind it. Mum and dads bedroom was to the left next to it. Along the corridor at the rear of the building there was my single bedroom and then my sisters Rosemary and Janet had a shared bedroom on the end. From their bedroom a low cupboard type door gave access to the remaining loft space which was boarded over and with lighting. When we were small this was our indoor playing area, around the family's stored junk, but we had to be very quiet as this area was over the offices. We gained access to our flat through a doorway at the front and to the right of the building leading to the only

stairs up to the second floor but which also accessed stairs down to the cellar. Just to the right of our entrance on the ground floor was a small room which my mother took over as our sitting room, I don't think it was ever part of our accommodation but she kept it throughout her years there.



The front view of the Dower House at the time we lived there.

The main entrance to the house was toward the left hand end facing the building from the front. From the porch and vestibule was a beautiful entrance hall with dark wood staircase leading up to the first floor which had a fireplace with copper surround set into it. From the main hallway to the left at the front, in what had originally been the morning room, there was the sergeants mess with the original drawing room to the rear behind it being the officers mess. Both of these rooms were ornately panelled with attractive period fireplaces. Both were set out with armchairs settees and occasional tables. To the right from the hallway at front the original dining room became the other ranks mess with full size snooker table, much used by my sisters and I when nobody else was there, dart board etc. There was no door at the rear of the building but to the right of the hallway a passageway led to an exit at the right hand end of the house. Rooms to the left of this passageway, along the rear of the building, were used for storage, armoury and most important a pantry for making tea.

The first floor was mainly set out to office and meeting rooms. The large bedroom over the officers' mess was used as the Brigadier's, with a small office for his clerk next door, whilst

the brigade major had an office in what would have been a bedroom overlooking the car park. Other rooms were used as map rooms, planning rooms and so on.

Outside to the rear of the building was a lawned area with orchards on either side, the current hotel entrance driveway did not exist at that time, with shrubs and trees around the periphery. At the front there was a large gravelled car park with a high screening hedge to its right, as you face the building, with another orchard behind it. To the left of the car park was an ornamental garden and pond area with a further gravel driveway alongside it leading to the house being occupied by the previous owners, but fenced off, their access being from the A21.

When we moved in the place was in a bit of a mess. The fire surround in the entrance hall had tarnished and looked a green brown colour, most of the rooms were mucky and the floor coverings were in need of replacing, all the floors were soon covered in army brown lino which needed polishing most days. Most of the rooms had open coal fired fireplaces. Many of these being lit on cold days from the autumn onwards as the coke fired boiler kept going out. The boiler room was situated underground below the fireplace in the entrance hall and could only be accessed via a small doorway outside at the rear of the building below the large hall window and inside could be found a vertical metal ladder. Over many months, perhaps years, the ashes produced by the burned coke had been left in the boiler house. In order to get the boiler working properly all the ash had to be removed. Getting into the boiler room would have been next to impossible for an adult so it became my job. I filled a metal bucket with a small shovel, then my father pulled the bucket out on a rope and emptied it into a wheelbarrow. After he had filled the wheelbarrow whilst he took it away to empty I had to come out of the boiler house as the dust and fumes left me struggling to breath. Eventually the huge old coke boiler was tamed and the house heated from the mass of metal piping which fed the ornamental radiators.

During our second year at the Dower House the garages were built. Two openings were made through the hedge to the right of the house from the car park and the orchard in that area removed. These garages housed a range of army vehicles from Land Rovers and Austin Champs to large lorries. In addition to the normal army vehicles a Light Aid Division was accommodated here. Their vehicles included a huge Scammel commercial recovery vehicle, a mobile workshop on an Austin chassis and vehicle stores trucks. To the left of the main garage building a vehicle maintenance bay with pit, storage for oils in separate rooms and a fitter's office was built. Opposite the garage doors on the other side of the enormous concrete pad were fuel pumps fed from storage tanks. Along the rear of the garage an indoor shooting range for light weapons was built.

At this time the staff based at the Dower House comprised several civilian workers, in addition to the caretaker I remember Harry, an ex-soldier who was storekeeper/armourer, Tom Mitchell, vehicle fitter who lived in the village, with others who came and went but were mainly based at other nearby T.A. centres. In addition to the Brigadier, Brigade Major and a staff sergeant, all regular soldiers, there were a number of national service men who acted as clerks, drivers etc. The method of selection for these guys has always puzzled me. Most of them were from Scottish regiments, several had specific skills gained prior to

commencing with their national service with army which could have been useful to the service, one had been a lorry driver so he became a clerk, another an excellent chef who cooked some lovely meals for our family as we got to know him, became the Brigadiers driver. They were billeted with families who took in lodgers in Tunbridge Wells and travelled to and from on the bus. One I remember slept on the floor of his office as he was married and struggled on the poor pay received by national serviceman.

On Tuesday and Thursday evenings and on some weekends the Territorial Army soldiers based at the Dower House would attend for training. Most of the building would be in use then and so we kept out of the way in our own quarters. For the most part however evenings and weekends we had the place to ourselves and it was a great place to grow up and play. Behind the garage and range we could walk straight into the woodland that stretched all the way down to Pembury old church. In the summer we would be out in this vast area all day with our friends.

At Christmas when we had the place to ourselves we would spread out, the officers mess became our sitting room and the sergeants mess our dining room with members of the family and friends, some of whom would stay over sleeping in the offices on camp beds from Harry's store, staying for the festive period.

As Brigade H.Q. the building would host all sorts of functions. Conferences were held every now and then with other senior officers in similar capacities from other locations attending. On these days the car park would be filled with staff cars. Important people, Tunbridge Wells Mayor, Lord Lieutenant of Kent, etc would come for visits. Party's for officers from the brigade would be held sometimes with the ladies in attendance, very colourful affairs with full dress uniforms and expensive dresses.

Mum used to make the morning and afternoon tea and coffee for everybody on site and take the brigadier and major theirs with biscuits to their offices. I don't think this was ever part of her job but she enjoyed doing it. One morning she delivered the brigadier his at around 10-15 a bit early. He asked her to sit down to chat about some function which was about to take place at the Dower House. She explained that she couldn't stay just then as she had to catch the 10-30 bus to Tunbridge Wells to do her shopping. The brigadier persuaded her by saying he would send her to shop after they had finished the meeting with his driver in the staff car. Later that morning my father was driving his Maidstone & District bus along Mount Pleasant Road to turn into Monsoon Road but there was a big traffic hold up. Imagine his surprise when he finally arrived at the right turn into Monsoon Road to find in front of him an Army Staff car parked outside Sainsbury's and the Opera House, where normal cars were not allowed to park, with an army driver helping his wife into the car with her shopping and a policeman directing the traffic around them. They would have been there some time as Sainsbury's in those day comprised of several counters, cheese for one, vegetables another, meat another and so on each with its own till so it would be necessary to queue at each for service.

In the run up to Christmas a party for all the H.Q. staff and T.A. personnel based there would take place. Officers and their Lady's, Sergeants and their wives', other ranks and their

women were invited. I always struggled with the wording of the invite but I suppose that was because of my lack of understanding of the army system. I am glad I missed national service as I fear I may have spent much of it in the cells. National servicemen appeared in my eyes to be treated as the lowest of the low. One of the brigade majors I remember smoked a pipe. When stood in the car park he would knock out his finished pipe against the side of his staff car before refilling it. The ash would streak the side of the highly polished vehicle and a few minutes later he would loudly and publicly ball out his national service driver for not keeping the car clean.

In my teenage years however I joined the army cadets in nearby Matfield. In addition to drill and fieldcraft at the rear of our cadet hut we had a rifle range. Here I had a huge advantage over compatriots. With the Brigadiers permission Harry would issue me with a .22 rifle and a pile of ammunition and when our range at the Dower House was not in use I would spend hours there alone in target practice. Soldiers based at the Dower house were required to fire off so many rounds per year but often they didn't do it, so Harry would be left with ammunition to be used up. Soon I qualified as a marksman with a .22. Once or twice a year senior cadets would go to outdoor ranges to fire a few rounds with a .303 rifle or Bren machine gun. When I could I would go out with the Territorial guys at weekends to the range so had much more opportunity to use these weapons so again gained a marksman badge with them.

Every year the Territorials in the whole brigade would go off for two weeks of annual camp somewhere. One of the conditions my father had to comply with, as caretaker at the Dower House, was to join the T.A. Never having been a soldier and refusing to march or go on parade this proved a problem. The brigadier decided the best solution was to put Ernie in the Light Aid Detachment, despite the fact he was not a vehicle fitter, as they would follow along behind the main convey of vehicles, mostly wore greasy overalls and didn't have behave like infantrymen.

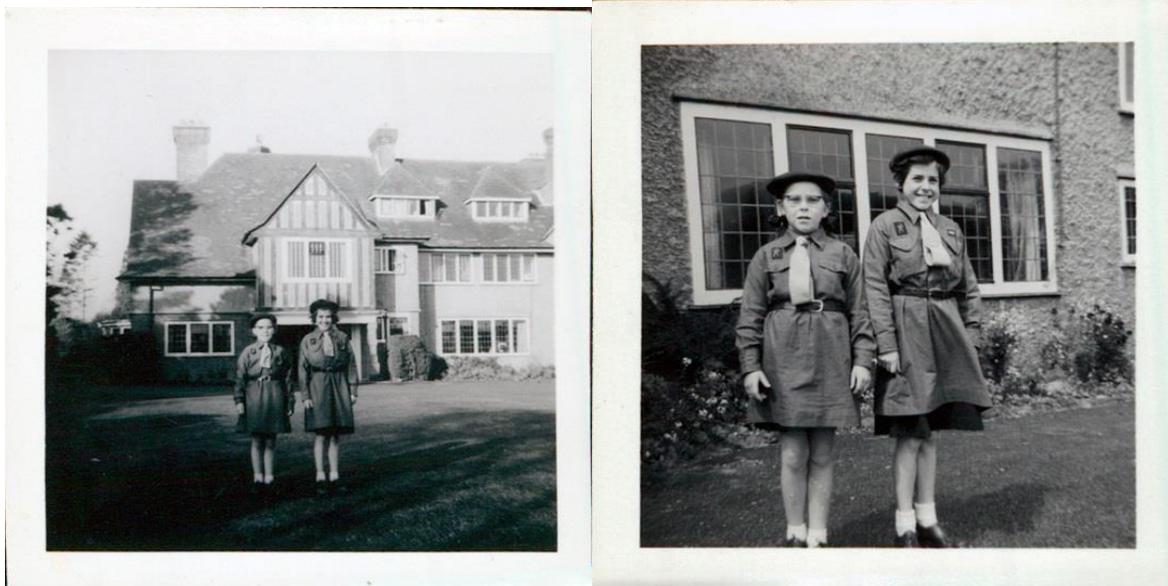
On leaving secondary school in Tunbridge Wells I start an apprenticeship as a Turner and Fitter in Tonbridge. As there was no direct public transport I travelled to and from initially on an old BSA Bantam 125 motor bike then an old Ford 5cwt ex sweeps van both of which Tom our fitter helped me do up. I married and moved out to at semidetached house in Henwood's Mount Pembury toward the end of my five year apprenticeship. My sister Rosemary moved into my old single bedroom at the Dower House. Rosemary had been involved in a road accident while we lived in Paddock Wood breaking her femur, she spent several weeks at Pembury Hospital in traction and suffered with asthma from that time onward. She died in 1965 in that room from heart failure bought on by the asthma soon after I moved out. She had just started her first job, in the offices of the company I worked in at Tonbridge. Her funeral at the Crematorium at Tunbridge Wells was attended by not only her numerous friends and members of our family but many of our workmates, and just about all of the soldiers based at the Dower House, the chapel was packed.

I don't think my parents were ever really settled at the Dower House and soon after that with my remaining sister Janet they moved to the Drill Hall in St Margaret's Street

Rochester, Kent, shortly after which the 133 (Kent and Sussex) Infantry Brigade was disbanded in 1967 and the Dower House sold.

Attached is a copy of 'A brief history' of the Brigade, written by Patrick (Pat) Newman, who was based at the Dower House during the period of our tenancy of the Dower House and became a good friend to my mother and father, it outlines the whole history of the organisation. It was taken from his typewritten document so I hope you will be able to read it.

Following are some of our family archive photos taken while we were at the Dower House. Somewhere there must be many other photographs taken at the time, both inside and out, as when distinguished visitors came the local press often took pictures for the paper. Around the walls of the various messes there were pictures taken on formal occasions, but I don't know what happened to them after the closure in 1967.



My sister Rosemary (tallest) and Janet pictured at the front of the Dower House ready to go to Brownies. The large window shown in the right hand photo was into the room used as the other ranks mess.



On the left my mum and sisters next to the Brigadiers Humber staff car, badge of office covered as he was not in it, Dower House on the left and workshop/garage in the background. Right hand my sister Rosemary with an aeroplane we had made for our village fete, part of the house and remains of the hedge removed when the garages were built can be seen behind her.



On the left myself ready for army cadets pictured outside our entrance to the house. The arch window behind was into our sitting room. Right hand picture near the main house entrance.



Left, family members gathered on the lawn at the rear of the house. This is the only photo I could find showing the rear of the building. The top three windows on the second floor are into the rear corridor of our flat. To the right of the building the large window first and ground floor is into main hall, the little doorway to the boiler house was just below it. The fireplace in the right hand photo was in our co-opted family downstairs sitting room.

Peter Lush (now living in Derbyshire) Feb 2018