

Growing up at 126 Chesterton Road, Cambridge, 'St Aidan's',
home of John McLean Leach and family

Chapter 1

I moved with my parents to 126 in 1948, aged 4, after living at 11 Chedworth Street, Newnham, Cambridge with my maternal grandparents. My maternal grandmother had died - I remember standing in the hall looking up at soberly dressed family mourners in my best dress. My father's sister, husband and family, had been living at 126 before us, with my paternal grandmother. We, my father, mother and I moved to Chesterton Road and my maternal grandfather continued to live in Chedworth Street with a live-in housekeeper. Before the age of 5 I started school at St Mary's, then called Paston House, where my mother had been to school.

My father made the smallest 1st floor bedroom at 126 into a kitchen, the largest 1st floor bedroom into a living room, the 1st floor 'garden bedroom' was their bedroom. My bedroom overlooked the garden on the attic floor above, where there was also a front attic bedroom and a storage room called 'the black attic'. The beds had dark headboards and the mattresses rested on tight (once upon a time) stretched rather rusty coiled wire. Nowhere as comfortable as our modern supportive beds. Pillows were feather. Eiderdowns were feather. Sheets were flat and went to the laundry, returning stiff and shiny. Towels went too, far from soft and fluffy on their return.

A rubber-rolled mangle stood in the back yard which must have been used in times gone by. My grandmother had the ground floor dining room as a bed sit, with the old oak gate leg table brought into use when my aunt and family came to stay, which was several times a year in school holidays (my uncle was a teacher). The main kitchen was on the ground floor with 'the back yard' off it with an outside loo for the one-time maid and the coal hole and the coke hole. The kitchen had a coke boiler which probably burnt some of the rubbish, which otherwise was put in the metal dustbins, metal to contain ash from the fires. The dustmen called every Boxing Day for their tip (or 'box') and could be aggressive. There was a pantry off, with a meat safe (against flies) - a metal cupboard with a fine metal grille in its door - and marble shelves where butter and milk and groceries requiring cool conditions were kept. The front room was my grandmother's reception room, filled with antiques, eg a grandmother clock on its own shelf, gilt convex mirror with bird holding spheres on a chain from his beak. I have kept the best walnut chest of drawers from that room, I employed Jonathan Porter to restore it for me. A lot of furniture needed attention. The grandfather clock in the hall required servicing frequently, latterly by Mr Jackson, who had a swashbuckling air. When I removed it I soon discovered that moving it upset it. It chimed, in the hall, every quarter of an hour but at night we always slept through it. Quite a lot of fancy stuff in the front room, 2 nice old dining chairs, with woodworm, were fiercely bid for at Cheffins auction rooms in 1994/5 and sold for £2,000, a lot of money but I think they had the original upholstered seats. I often wonder where they went. I had stood on one, rather foolishly, clutching an armful of china and glass from the nearby dresser, heard a slight crunch as I dropped neatly through the seat frame and landed with intact china, unharmed, bang through the middle. Other furniture and old things I sold to William Heffer, an antique dealer, as great aunt Ada had married Harry Heffer (of the bookshop, now Blackwells). My aunt took several fine walnut pieces of furniture for her home when she moved away. There is a beam from either side of the bay window where a curtain was put up in winter to prevent draughts. My father and sister probably acted little dramas there, like curtains on a stage. The house was full of draughts, the windows were lead paned with curlicue fasteners and the dining room windows were smaller panes, bowing out a bit. The front porch contained an old church pew and above it a seraglio, a sort of Eastern window where women were hidden from the men. A handsome knife chest stood on a hutch aka chest in the hall. Stolen amongst other items in 1994? There is a cloakroom/WC under the stairs. In my grandmother's day it had the high wall mounted cistern and I was unable ever to pull its chain to flush it successfully.

The loo seats were large, wooden, warm and unhygienic. The loo paper was Bronco, incredibly inefficient crisp dry rusty stuff. Toothbrushes were wooden, the bristles were exactly that, pig bristles. My mother used to boil new ones before use. We had toothpaste in flat tins (like shoe polish) and some heartily minted chalky white toothpaste called Kolynos. I loathed cleaning my teeth and had a lot of fillings. Going to the dentist was something I dreaded. When my father was a child they used a tin bath. Thankfully there was a decent bath in the 1st floor bathroom, you could lie comfortably back and add more hot water by twiddling the tap with your toes. My father installed a heated towel rail, which took the winter chill off the air, and then a wall mounted radiant heater which I used to put on 20 minutes before a winter bath. Early 20th century my grandfather had been one of the first to instal an electric light - all 25 watts of it - in the hall.