

Autobiography chapter: Friends

Eric Whittaker

It would of course be impracticable to include under this heading everybody that I have known or even everybody that I have liked. My definition is restricted to those who interacted with me to a considerable extent for a significant period, and to group them by the start of such a period.

At Alderley Edge i.e. up to 1936

Arthur Summerfield was my first friend – we were certainly friends by the time he was 2 in 1925 and I was 3½. Obviously I cannot remember our first meeting, but he lived just across the road from us, and our mothers were sufficiently friendly for my mother to take me and Mrs Summerfield and Arthur out to “The Café” in Alderley on 11 November 1925. I can remember us standing still and looking wonderingly at our mothers during the 2 minutes silence at 11 am, and the year is fixed by the fact that I am pretty certain that Dora was not present, and she was born in February 1926. Since we only moved to Alderley at the end of November 1924 the date is fixed precisely, and we must have been friends for some months before that. Arthur was my best friend before we went to school (I in April 1928 and he joined me in the September), and then at our first school until his parents moved to Manchester in March 1931. I was devastated and moaned to Mum that I would never see him again. We wrote to each other for the rest of that year, but then about the end of 1931 Mrs Summerfield committed suicide. My parents did not let on that she had died, and this fact was leaked to me by Geoffrey Tinker (see below) in my mother’s hearing and she rushed in to say that they had heard that she had died of ’flu. I think she really knew the truth (it must have been in the paper, otherwise they would have known nothing) and probably Geoff did too, but it was hushed up from me. I did not dare to write to Arthur and he did not write to me, so we lost touch for either about 1¼ years or 2¼ years – probably the former. Then Mr Tinker happened to meet Mr Summerfield and Arthur in the street in Manchester and invited them over for a Saturday afternoon. Arthur and I were overjoyed to be re-united, and we have never lost touch since. At this time Mr Summerfield had moved from their first place in Chorlton-cum-Hardy to Harpursley on the north side – neither very salubrious districts – but eventually in autumn 1934 when Arthur won a place at

Manchester Grammar School they moved to a much nicer area in Rusholme. From 1933 to 1936 Arthur and Dora used to come over for a day several times a year, I think and about the spring of 1936 I went to their house for the afternoon on a Saturday. In November 1936 Arthur came to stay with me for half-term and went down with mumps and tonsillitis, and of course passed on the former to me. I think he came to stay with me each year in 1937 and 1938 at Derby. Then in 1939 he wrote to say that his father had died, but in spite of his being only 16 he managed to remain the tenant of their council house and swapped it for a flat - he was determined that he and Dora should stay together to be independent. He had to leave school and get a job as an office boy in an insurance office. He and Dora came to us for Christmas 1939, and I next saw him in spring 1940 when I went to stay with Dick (see below) at Stockport. He then told me that he was determined to do Higher School Certificate (he had just got School Cert when his father died). In fact he succeeded in getting a grant to go back to school and do just that, and in spite of having missed some months of schooling he took it in the summer of 1941. They came to stay with us for Christmas in 1940 and 1941. He sat for a demyship in Chemistry at Magdalen in December 1941 and we were very disappointed that he did not get it and so join up with me again. I went to stay with him for the best part of a week in September 1941, and in September 1942 he came to Oxford for a week and stayed in my digs - in fact we moved in there together. He had remained at school till July 1942 and then took a bursarship at Manchester Tech (later UMIST) to do electrical engineering - that being the only thing available, though it would not have been his first choice. After about one year he was called up into the Fleet Air Arm. At the time he came to stay with me in Oxford in September 1942 he was just getting attached to Stella Pear whose father was Professor of Psychology at Manchester, and when he was called up in 1943 he and Dora had to give up their flat. He left his effects at the Pears' house. This would be just after Dorothy and I visited their flat from Alderley in July 1943.

Arthur was on leave for his 21st birthday in March 1944 and had a party at the Pears' house, which I attended. At the time of our wedding he was in Ulster so could not come, but he was on leave and visited us at Derby on 1st November 1944 (my birthday) and came again a few days later bringing Stella with him. The next time we met was after he was demobbed, and he came to see us at High Lane in late 1945 or early 1946. On this occasion the affair with Stella was off and he brought photographs of Aline, whom he married in July 1946, and moved into her flat in London. He had however acquired a deep interest in psychology from Professor Pear (and remained in permanent contact with the family) and from 1946-9 did a degree course in psychology at University College, London, at the end of which he was immediately appointed to the staff. About 10 years or so later he became Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck. Over the years from 1946-64 I frequently stayed with Arthur and Aline when visiting London on business and Arthur and I used to stay up half the night talking on such occasions. They came to stay with us once about 1953, when Quentin was about 3 or 4 and Penelope quite small,

but they never came to our Chinley house. After we moved to Oxford it was much more rarely that I had any occasion to stay in London, so I saw Arthur more rarely. He and Aline called in briefly at Hampton Poyle in 1966. When I did see them I gathered that Aline was rather disenchanted with life and presumes that this was because Arthur had become something of a workaholic. Dorothy and I went to stay with them towards the end of 1972 after we had been to the Tutankhamen exhibition, and that was the last time we saw Aline. In fact I hardly heard anything from Arthur for a year, when he wrote a long letter to explain that he had left Aline at the beginning of 1973 and gone to live with Angela, a lecturer on his staff, a divorce was almost complete, and they were to be married in February. Strangely enough a great friend of Arthur from Manchester days, Butsi whom I had met several times, had lost his wife in an accident at around the same time and married Aline soon after Arthur married Angela. I was very sad about all this as I had been very fond of Aline, but we went to Arthur and Angela's wedding at a register office in North London, and soon got to like Angela too.

In 1990 Arthur had quite a serious stroke and lost the power of speech. Fortunately under Angela's care and tuition he gradually recovered it and the remaining hesitations have now (1993) almost completely disappeared. Arthur's parents were not churchgoers, and I remember from when I was very young my mother explaining to me that not everyone was baptised and she did not suppose that either Arthur or Dora had been. However in 1991 Arthur decided to get baptised and confirmed, and in early 1992 we had long theological discussions on the phone. The ceremony took place on St Mary Magdalen's day 1992 and I read a lesson and was his sponsor, so my oldest friend became my newest godson.

Geoffrey Tinker

I must have known him from about the same time as I knew Arthur. He was a year and a bit older than me, and his parents were Methodists so we saw one another at Sunday School and Chapel. After Arthur left Alderley, Geoff and I used to play together more often, and as he went to the Cheadle Hulme School (to which he had gone long before I went to Stockport) on the same train as I went to Stockport. I used to see him there too for a time until he was taken from there and sent to the sea-training ship HMS Conway. After that we did things together occasionally in the holidays, but our friendship did not really outlast my leaving Alderley in 1936. I saw him twice after that, once in 1940 I think when I visited Alderley and we went for a walk, and again in 1941 when he and his parents came to stay for a few days in Llandudno when we were on holiday there. He became an architect and lived at Hathersage, but although this was not far away from New Mills or Chinley we never got in touch with each other.

John Ashworth

We met in about 1929 when our mothers were taking part in running some charitable event in aid of Dr Barnardo's. The Ashworths lived in a big house up Congleton Road and were much the wealthiest people we knew, but they were not at all stuck up. He

and I used to go to tea with one another in school holidays, he being at a prep school at Glossop in term time. I greatly enjoyed going to his house and his mother was a very nice person too. The first time I ever went to a theatre was when our mothers took us to a pantomime in Manchester about 1930, and in 1931 his parents took him and me to the circus at Belle Vue. In about 1934 he was very ill with mastoid in both ears and meningitis. He nearly died and was ill for a year. As a result I only saw him once or twice after that before we left Alderley, and I never saw him again and only heard of him indirectly through our mothers. Tragically his father committed suicide after a violent quarrel in which he shot someone in 1943.

At Stockport Grammar School 1931-36

Jack Sugden was the first person at Stockport that I made friends with, initially because he reminded me of Arthur. We were to some extent rivals academically, though I only once beat him to an overall 1st place in class! We occasionally visited each others houses in holiday times. After 1936 I saw him once (at the Grammar School speech day in 1937 when I was staying in Stockport). After school his mother and step-father moved to Leeds, and in 1942 when I first went there to stay with Dorothy we went round to see his mother. I had no further contact till 1987 when I was his name in a list of "old boys" and wrote to him. We met him and his wife at a school 5th centenary occasion at the Houses of Parliament and they came to see us and we went to see them in Woking. We still exchange cards at Christmas since that time.

Dick Mills

By the end of my first year at Stockport Dick had become my closest friend. We frequently visited each others houses in holidays, and this continued after I had gone to Derby, with fairly prolonged visits each way. At Whitsuntide 1939 I went to stay for the weekend (Friday - Tuesday) with him and his family at their favourite resort, Pwllheli. On this occasion Dick (17) had already learnt to drive so we were able to range independently over the Lleyn Peninsula. While I was at Oxford we used to write to one another voluminously and frequently, and continued to visit each other in holidays. When I went to Ferodo I went to spend several weekends with the family - indeed I felt very much at home with them. After Dorothy and I were married we continued to visit each other until Dick moved to London in the 50s. In fact in 1944-5 Mr Mills called me to go and tutor Dick's sister Dorothy on a weekly basis for her Higher School Certificate. She was 5 years younger than Dick and me and when she was about 10 she regarded me as the bee's knees! Dick was therefore highly amused that I should marry another Dorothy, and still more so when she married another Whitaker (albeit with one 't'); after which he used to refer to her as my eponymous wife. Very sadly she died of leukaemia in her mid thirties leaving three young children. Dick was Anthony's godfather and during

his childhood gave him memorable presents. He also came to Anthony's wedding. We thought Dick was a confirmed bachelor but in 1959 he married Margaret Green. Dorothy and I went to the wedding in a village in Essex. It was the first time we had ever left Anthony and Roger for a whole day, and Dorothy's mother and niece Dorothy came over to look after them. Since we moved to Oxford we have exchanged visits occasionally and have always kept up with cards on holiday and at Christmas. Dick went to Manchester University to read dentistry. Indeed in 1943 after I was at Ferodo I visited him at the Dental Hospital to have a tooth filled free as part of his training. When he qualified he was called up to serve as an army dentist, so was not available to be my best man, and was soon sent to India. After he was demobbed he returned to university on the staff first at Manchester, then at Liverpool, and finally at London where he became Professor of orthodontics. He died of cancer of the pancreas in January 1995, and we went to the funeral. It was only from one of the funeral addresses that I learnt how eminent he had been. I knew that he had obtained the rather rare qualification FDSRCS (fellow in dental surgery of the Royal College of Surgeons). But I did not know that having initially taken the LDS qualification (not the BDS and therefore not a university degree) he had subsequently, while working, taken an MSc and a PhD. There was a large throng of his dental colleagues and pupils at the funeral.

At Derby School 1937-9

I only made one friend at Derby, **Ronald Bentley**. We did quite a lot of things together at that time, and indeed for as long as I was spending vacations at Derby. He and I were the only two in our year at school who wanted to do chemistry at university, but he failed to get a schol. He therefore took a job as a lab steward in the chemistry department at Derby Tech, which enabled him to study at the same time and do a London external BSc in 1943 – in which he came top in the whole country! On the strength of this he got a research studentship at the Royal College of Science where he worked on the structure of penicillin. We met in London a number of times and he came to stay briefly at New Mills. He was my best man in 1944. In the late 40s he got a fellowship to go to the States for a couple of years where he met Marian. He returned to a job at Mill Hill with the Medical Research Council, went back to the US to marry Marian, and they lived in Highgate. He went to lecture at Pittsburgh and eventually became a full professor of biochemistry there. When I was at a conference at Pennsylvania State College in 1957, Ronald and Marian drove over (200 miles) to see me – which was very nice. Since then however we have rather lost touch. I wrote after a lapse of many years (about 1987) and had a friendly reply but there was no response to an attempt to maintain the correspondence. But this has been renewed in 1999-2000.

It is a curious fact the my best friends at each of my three schools all became professors – of psychology, dentistry and biochemistry. It is also curious that I did much better

academically than any of them up to the age of 18, but they all obviously surpassed me at the finals stage. I have to console myself with the thought that I at least made something of a comeback in middle life, and though I never acquired the coveted title there have at least been many people who have preferred a readership at Oxford to a chair elsewhere!

At Oxford 1939-43

It is complicated to record friends at this stage, because there were many of them who I saw a lot of at the time but few with whom I kept in contact. Also of course it would be inappropriate to include Dorothy as one of them. In addition there were some of whom I saw a lot for an amazingly (in retrospect) short time, and some with whom I lost touch and then regained it. It is probably best to divide them into two sets, at Magdalen and among Methodist circles.

Magdalen

The first person I got to know at Magdalen was **Frank Schofield**, a physicist from Manchester Grammar School. We talked to one another when we were up for the scholarship exams in December 1938, and we both got demysships. We therefore sought each other out when we arrived in October 1939, and the contact was cemented when we both saw that the other had a card left by the Methodist chaplain, Freddie Greaves. So we started off by attending Methodist things together - but this was a flash in the pan as far as he was concerned. He was a nominal Methodist so put himself down as such when asked his denomination by the Dean of Divinity, and he joined in with everything to start with, but gave it all up again before the end of the first term. However we went on seeing a lot of each other in college, usually sitting together at dinner, and I often went round to his room to hear the 9 o'clock news (and ITMA at 8.30 on Thursdays) as he had a radio (which few people had). So our friendship lasted two years till he was called up, but we never corresponded afterwards and I only saw him once again when he called at Magdalen in my 4th year.

It was not until our 2nd year that **John Hurst** and I became friends and he too was called up in 1941, so we were only there together for one year. However in that time we became close friends and introduced each other to each other's parents (his father was a vicar). He came to Oxford several times in my 3rd year, and we wrote to each other till about 1949. He once called to see us at New Mills, but we were out and he left a note - but I never heard from him again - what went wrong I do not know. We saw him again

in 1964 in the library at Trinity College, Dublin where he was by then the librarian. He died about 1991.

Lionel Clowes did not come up until Trinity Term of my 2nd year (although he was 2 months older than me) and he was called up in the summer of 1942, so we only coincided for 4 terms, but he was there when the first two had departed. We did not correspond after 1942, but about 1948 I saw him in the refectory at Manchester University, and after he returned to Oxford in 1949 I occasionally visited him in his lab when I happened to be in Oxford, and on several occasions he invited me up to his house for the evening so I met Isobel. As a result of these contacts, and of finding that we had a recently acquired mutual interest in drawing and painting we became increasingly friendly, and after my return to Oxford we used to lunch together at Halifax House in 1965-7, and went to art classes together, and eventually to many great painting weeks in Malvern. So our Magdalen friendship has survived the most closely of any.

Michael Eagar was a year senior to me, but he joined up in 1939 so I did not know him until he returned to Oxford in 1940 having lost his hearing as a result of meningitis while in the forces. He was reading geology so I used to see him in the Department of Mineralogy and Crystallography, and we used to walk together between the labs and college. So I knew him moderately well for 2 years but we never communicated with one another after he went down in 1942. Then about 1947 I met him on my bus as I went to work – by which time he was at Manchester Museum. The re-contact led to our seeing each other quite a lot, and he came to stay with us for a number of weekends at New Mills. We have always kept in touch since but have of course only seen each other on fairly rare occasions when he has come to Oxford or I have been to Manchester, and on one occasion since he retired to Knaresborough when we were visiting Harrogate, but we have attended Magdalen events together.

There remain three others at Magdalen who barely satisfy the requirements for inclusion but who cannot be excluded.

The shortest-lived friendship was with **Christopher Derrick** who came up for Trinity Term 1940 and then joined up after one term, but while it lasted it was particularly close and had the traditional character of a college friendship that we would sit up arguing about our philosophy of life – he was a Roman Catholic so we had lots to argue about. We did exchange one or two letters while he was in the forces. Since then I have twice seen letters from him in *The Times* and on the second occasion wrote to him and had a reply.

The longest lasting one at Magdalen on the other hand was **Barry Nicholls**, an American, who was there for my whole four years. We were very different types indeed, but we were always in the same group who sat together in Hall though with changing additions as other people came and went. With the departure of others we saw more of each other, and I even typed my Part II thesis in 1943 on his typewriter. Since he went

down about 1945 he has given no information about himself to the College except his address in Rothesay where he still seems to live, but he did not reply to a letter.

Tom Corlett actually falls into both categories, He came up in October 1940 and was up for two years. In college we tended to be in quite different sets of friends, but he was active in Methodist circles and in the fellowship group that I was in from January 1941 till he went down. He was the only Oxford friend who ever came to stay for a night at Littleover (when he was already in the RAF) and though we did not keep in touch by correspondence we met on a number of occasions at Magdalen gaudies and garden parties, and after one such gaudy he and his wife Mollie (née Rennison, also a contemporary Methodist at Oxford) came to lunch at Hampton Poyle.

That covers the friends at Magdalen, and brings me to my friends in Methodist circles.

Methodist friends

The first and closest of these was **Kofi Busia** – eventually prime minister of Ghana and the only one of my friends who enable me to make the traditional claim that at Oxford I rubbed shoulders with future prime ministers etc. He was Ken's friend in the Gold Coast and came over with Ken in September 1939 having already got a London degree in history and being already 26. He came to stay with us at Littleover for part of the time between his arrival in this country and the start of term. I regarded him as a very good and wise friend and I discussed with him practically all my problems. By force of personality he became the leader of a group of Methodist students over our first 4 terms – a group that varied in size from 8 to 11 and which contained my closest friends during that time. Being a senior (graduate) student he took his degree in 2 years and went back to the Gold Coast to do field work for a DPhil in anthropology in December 1941. After that I kept in touch with him till about 1965 but only saw him very rarely – once in Oxford when he returned with his first wife Amma, about 1947 and again that year when some of the above mentioned group met for a reunion at Matlock Bath. Then again at another such reunion in 1950 with his second wife Naa immediately after their marriage, and following that they came to stay with us at New Mills. The next time was in Oxford in 1965 when we came to Oxford to find a house, but by that time he was a refugee from the Nkrumah regime and we had to agree not to meet again because of the danger to Ken if our meeting were known to the Ghanaian authorities. The only two further occasions were very brief, once when Ken took us to his house in Standlake and once in the street in Oxford when he was prime minister and attended the conferral of an honorary degree on the President, Akufo Addo. After his second banishment in the early 70s I never saw him again and only once contacted him on the phone. He withdrew into ill-health, and I think bitterness, and rumours about his shortcomings

in power were very distressing – and I think true. He died in 1978 and I attended a memorial service at Wesley Memorial Church in Oxford.

The next two are best considered together – **Jack Gardner** and **Joan Brooks** – because they married each other. They were both members of the fellowship group that I joined in November 1939 and which was led by Kofi from January 1940. In our first year Jack was a vociferous pacifist, but changed his mind in the summer of 1940. In his second year he was in the ATC and was called up after doing shortened finals in English in summer 1941, just after they got engaged. In March 1942 he was to go to Canada for flying training and on 10 March they got married in Oxford on a 24 hour embarkation leave. I was best man, and had already helped Joan and her parents quite a bit in preparations before the day. On his wedding morning he came round to my room to collect me, and on the way to the church we went to buy the wedding ring (size K) and then to the Cadena to “have his last coffee as a single man” – it was one of the first times I drank coffee! The reception was at Somerville, and a gang of us went to the station to see them off on the train to Manchester. Jack returned in the autumn of 1942 and used to manage to get to Oxford fairly often on leave between bombing missions (he was a bomber pilot). Eventually he was reported missing in early June 1943. Fortunately on 3 August, the day I started work, I had a letter from Joan to say he was safe and a P.O.W.

I always felt a great sense of confidence in Joan – she must in some way have filled the role of an older sister that I never had, being 2½ years older than me. When I was in the dumps in February 1941 she took me to see “The Great Dictator” (the film) that Jack had already seen in the vac, and it was there that I must have caught scarlet fever and so met Dorothy! In our fourth year we planned and jointly ran a group for (mainly) first year undergraduates. While Jack was a POW she even gave me one of her ration of letters so that I could write to him. In December 1943 we managed to meet for lunch in Manchester, which made us both feel that we had re-established contact in our diaspora from Oxford, and in August 1944 she was the only guest (i.e. other than family, bridesmaid and best man) whom Dorothy and I invited to our wedding.

Over the years since then we have not of course met very often. After Jack came back from Germany in 1945 I went to see them for a day at Bedford on my way home from London. In November 1947 they organised a reunion of our “group” from Oxford at Willersley Castle Matlock which was attended by six of us, and again in August 1950 at their house in Bo’ness in Scotland where there were seven of us. Some time in 1952 Dorothy and Anthony and I went to see them at their house in Sidcup for an afternoon, and I went there for a night in about 1959 and saw Jack – but Joan was in hospital having a baby. In 1971 Dorothy and Roger and I were passing through Darlington and called on spec and saw Joan but Jack was at work of course, and I never saw him again – he died about 1979 of cancer. Whenever I sing “Love divine all loves excelling” at church I see myself standing singing it next to Jack at their wedding and feel that he is already “casting down his golden crown around the glassy sea”. Since Jack died Joan has been

to see us about half a dozen times when either visiting Oxford or as an excursion when staying with her sister at Coventry.

The other members of “the group” are perhaps best listed together. We felt very close to one another while we were at Oxford and we kept in touch by means of a circulating group letter that went on for about a dozen years – who eventually was responsible for breaking the circulation I don’t know. Apart from the three already dealt with, there were:

George Willan. He went in the RAF in 1941 and survived. He came to see me in Oxford again in 1943, and we met him and his wife for a picnic in 1957 in Delamere Forest. I only saw him again once by chance at Oxford station about 1966. He did not come to the reunions.

Romola Verney went down in 1942 and she came to both the group reunions in 1947 and 1950 and came to see us at New Mills once about 1956 when she was living with her parents in Stockport.

Dorothy Leith also came to both reunions, and about 1987 wrote to say she was in a nursing home in Oxford following a cancer operation so we went to visit her. Since then she has been to see us a couple of times and we have been to see her in Swindon.

Margaret James was in Oxford till 1943. She did not come to the reunions and the only time I saw her again was in 1984 when she was at a Somerville reunion with Joan Gardner and I showed them around some of the changes in Oxford.

Jean Weaver was only with us for Michaelmas Term 1939 and Trinity Term 1940, being the first leader of the group but already in her DipEd (fourth) year, She lived in Llandudno at the time and I called to see her there in summer 1941 when on holiday, but she never integrated with the rest of us having missed the crucial Hilary Term 1940 when Kofi became our leader.

Ann Early only joined us in Trinity Term 1940 and so was only with us for 4 terms, She went down in 1941 and I never saw her again, though heard at second hand that she had a pitiful old age marred by anorexia and withdrawal.

Tom Green also only joined us in Trinity Term 1940 and was only with us for one term but became very identified with us in that time. He came to the second reunion in 1950.