

Notes for Talks by Robert Bell (written late 1980s – early 1990s)

As written, with any additional comments italicised.

There are 2 handwritten versions, as well as some rough notes.

Version 1

This is not a history talk like Francis Cowe does so well. It's about a part of Berwick which I knew from 1923 to the beginning of the Second World War.

In the 1920s Berwick was all inside the walls. Certainly there was Castlegate and the Greens, and they had started council houses at Tweedmouth, but once you got to Castle Terrace or North Terrace you really were in the country.

My kingdom was the Walkergate, Chapel Street, Church Street, Wallace Green, The Parade and of course the Walls. In the 1870s my grandfather, who had a carters and horse dealers business, bought premises in Chapel Street. This consisted of two or three small houses and one larger house which had been before that a pub called the Tweed Inn. The property had a large yard where he was able to build stables for about twenty horses and sheds for the corn etc... to feed the horses. In the 1890s he converted the smaller houses into two decent houses for his two sons, one of whom was my father. Both worked for my grandfather and it was here I arrived at 44 Chapel Street in 1923. I wasn't like our Lord born in a stable, but very near to one.

Chapel Street and Walkergate at that time were a very poor area. The houses in the street were all very old tenement buildings where six or seven families shared an outside loo. Cooking facilities were an open fire and if you were lucky an oven that worked. Two rooms for a family of six or seven. Some had gaslight but others still had paraffin lamps or candles. Yet for all the poverty, the front steps were washed and rubbed with grey stone every day and no-one dare stand on them except the priest or minister or police or the tallyman.

Most of the people didn't want to live like this but in the twenties we were living in the aftermath of the Great War 1914-18. Widows bring up families on a few shilling a week, men who couldn't work because of their wounds or they had been gassed. Those fit men couldn't get jobs. Unemployment was high. There wasn't the DHSS, just the dole or the means test. Most of the men in work were labourers, Porters or drovers. Drovers were the men who walked the cattle to the cattle market in Castlegate where the car park is now, or out to outlying arms. This was the Berwick I grew up in.

Chapel Street and Walkergate were very narrow, on the same lines as the old Mediaeval streets had been – less than half the width they are now. Two cars couldn't pass in parts of Walkergate and Chapel Street. All the streets at that time were cobbled and all had gaslight. We often followed the Lamplighter on his rounds in the street.

I was lucky I had the yard and stables to play in or with friends it was only a couple of minutes to get the walls where we could let our imaginations run riot – games of cowboys and Indians, Tom Mix and all that or we would fight the Great War all over again. Then it would end up with a real fight between us.

We had plenty of small shops in the street. In fact you didn't need to go onto the High Street for anything. Starting in Walkergate at Skelly the butcher, next door was the pawn shop. That's where Longbones is now. Then Miss Renwick's China & Glass shop. Miss Renwick was an old lady always dressed in black. I don't think she ever used a duster in her shop as all her beautiful china etc... were always covered in dust. She also kept a parrot in the shop – so whenever anyone opened the door it would shout “Lizzie” and out she would come from the living room. In the passageway next to the shop her brother Jack ran a rag and bone business. Now he was handy for us kids because if we wanted to go to the pictures we would take some jam jars or if we had a rabbit for a meal the rabbit skin and we would get three pence or four pence for the skin or half penny for jars. I was lucky I could get horsehair and for a bundle I could get up to two shillings.

The next shop was Mrs Cooks sweetie shop and general store. The people in the street couldn't afford to buy sugar and tea etc... by the pound. Here at Cooks they could get two pence worth of tea or sugar, one penny pot of custard powder or even one Oxo cube. The men could buy two cigarettes instead of a packet. Then we had Mrs Woods second hand furniture shop.

On the opposite side we had the biggest and best shop of all, Ayton's Beehive Bazaar. This was wonderful for us kids. Here there were toys galore, also clothes and household items of all kinds. That's where we got our squibs and fireworks in November. Every year they had a fire and the shop would be bigger and better after it was repaired. They also had great fire-damaged sales.

Where W. Lows now stands was Lambs Laundry. They employed dozens of women and must have been a godsend to the economy of the area. Next facing down Chapel Street opposite the Cobbled Yard was Dudgeons Bakery. Run by Johnny Dudgeon, who seemed to be Mayor of Berwick all the time I was a boy. Their bakehouse was at the bottom of Chapel Street where City Electrics now occupy. It had been before that United Presbyterian Church. I can still remember the Sunday mornings in Chapel Street where the folk who hadn't proper ovens brought their Sunday roasts down to the bakery where for few coppers their roast tins would be numbered with chalk and put into the ovens and between twelve o'clock and one the smell of roast beef and roast potatoes as marvellous in Chapel Street. I can smell it yet!

Chapel Street itself hadn't many shops. We did have the Rose and Thistle at the top of the street. At the other side a coal shed, where coal was sold by the bucket, also paraffin and sticks. But we did have Kendal's lodging house where travellers or anyone on the road who had a few coppers could get a bed of a kind for very little. If there was a fight in the street it would be at Kendal's when they had too much Red Biddy (a cheap and dangerous drink of red wine and methylated spirit). Some of the customers stayed there permanently, with names like Old Paddy he had a beard nearly to his waist, Fat Kate, Jimmy the Weasel and lots of others I've now forgotten.

Between 1927-28 I started school and the school was the Parade school which of course was only a couple of minutes from home. My mother took me the first day and that was the only time she took me or met me from school. Different days. The first year I was there the New Bridge was to be opened by Edward Prince of Wales. So that day we had to be pretty smart. Clean jerseys and well polished boots! We were all given little flags and marched onto the New Bridge to wave and cheer the Prince. Along came the car with men in top hats and tailcoats and men in military uniforms and we all waved and cheered but to this day I don't know which man was the Prince of Wales. Anyway, it was a great day out for us and we also got a medal to commemorate it.

The Parade school at that time was mixed infants and girls' school, so after two years, at the age of seven, the boys had to go either to the Boys National School in Ravensdown or the British School in Palace Green. My parents chose the British school for me.

Version 2

Boyhood

In the late 1920s, early 30s, I was a schoolboy in Berwick. I shall try and tell you of the Berwick I knew at that time.

I attended the Parade school in 1928 and was lucky as that was the year the New Bridge was opened, so I was marched with the rest off the class onto the New Bridge and we waved our little flags as the Prince of Wales and all the other heigh head ones drove across in their motor cars. I can't remember now if I did see the Prince – all we did was to wave and cheer as the cars went by. Still, it was a great day. We had a day off school and we all got a medal to commemorate it. That's the earliest memory I have of the Parade School.

After 2 years there the boys had to move on either to the Boys National School in Ravensdowne or the British School in Palace Green: I went to the British School.

The Palace was a busy place in those days – a great place for children to play. The Boys Grammar School was only a few hundred yards away and the Boys National School at the bottom of Ravensdowne.

The brewery was in full swing, with the smell of hops and beer brewing, horses and carts with barrels and crates going back and forward.

Also on the Green behind the Scout Hall was a tank and field gun from the First World War, where we fought many a battle. Jimmy Strengths' statue was also behind the Scout Hall and at that time it hadn't been vandalised or broken.

The old Guard House that had once been on Marygate was down there and, of course, we were only yards away from the Walls with all the old cannons – a great playground!

During the Summer evenings a gang of us had a little cave in the cliffs behind the pier where we used to go, maybe taking a few sausages and cooking them over a fire, if any of us managed to bring a few matches. We also tried our first cigarettes there and they made us pretty green and sick. We always started for home when we heard the first curfew bell ring. I never heard of any child being molested or harmed in those days, now you daren't let them out of your sight.

I also remember going to Spittal either on the ferry from the quay or on Spowatts' little buses across the Old Bridge. These used to start from neat the Playhouse where for thruppence you could see Tom Mix or Gracie Fields and up Hide Hill was the New Theatre where you could also get in for thruppence. But the best place on Hide Hill was Woolworths – nothing over sixpence. What a wonderland that was!

The other big events for me were the March Hirings and the May fair. On the Hirings Saturday and the Fair Saturday, Church Street and Walkergate would be crowded with people going to the shows or the Parade.

I mentioned Walkergate. When I was a boy it was a very busy street. Hundreds of people lived there and if you were going to the Parish Church, Wallace Green Church, The Parade, the Barracks, The Catholic Church or Parade School, you went along Walkergate. I still remember it with Skelly's the butchers on one corner and Cowes' fish shop on the other. Then next to Skelly's was the Pawn Shop and then Miss Renwick's Glass and China shop. She also kept a parrot in the shop. Then up the passage next to her shop her brother would give you coppers for jam jars, rabbit skins, scrap metal or woollens. Many a time I've got the money for the pictures with empty jam jars. Next door was Mrs Cooks' sweetie shop, then Mrs Woods' second-hand shop.

Over on the other side of the street was the biggest shop, Ayton's Bazaar, where you really could buy anything – groceries, china, clothing, toys, you name it. Their toy fair at Christmas was fantastic.

Then back on the other side of the street was Hatters' Lane where Lambs Laundry employed the most people in the street.

The next hop in Walkergate facing down Chapel Street was Dudgeons' the bakers, presided over by old Mrs Dudgeon and her son, Johnnie and Bobbie. Johnnie was a singer and appeared in many local concerts. He also seemed to me then to be the permanent Mayor of Berwick.

Opposite Dudgeons on the corner of Chapel Street was the pub, Rose and Thistle. The only other shop I remember was Borthwick fish shop near the Catholic school. They also sold home-made pickles, beetroot, onions etc...where you took your jug and got thruppence worth of pickled beetroot, onions etc... The people in the street didn't need to go out of the street food their shopping as they had everything there. This was the same in many streets in Berwick at the time as money was very short and people could buy in small quantities in the little shops.

At the Hireings and May fair the Parade would be packed with shows. The living caravans would mostly be in Wallace Green and the stalls on the Parade or outside the Parade school and down into Church Street. There were cat-walks swings, shuggie boats, boxing ring, helter-skelter, hoopla stalls, coconut shies and shooting ranges. Also they had steam traction engines to pull the heavy stuff and to make the power for everything to work and for those hundreds of coloured light bulbs they used.

These traction engines were beautiful machines with all their brass and paintwork gleaming with polish. If there are any of them about today they must be worth a fortune.

Then the May fair on the High Street. Stalls from Cowes' fish shop right down to the Town Hall.

The normal Saturday market in those times only had a few fruit and vegetable stalls; not like today when you have stalls every Saturday selling everything. The May Fair was something to look forward to. China, glass, pots and pans, clothing, toys, linoleum, everything. The town would be filled with people; the pubs open all day – the best day of the year for the local traders and a real bonanza for we children. The noise, the excitement, the balloon sellers, fire-eaters, strongmen, the one-man bands. This went on from 9 o'clock Saturday morning 'til midnight. Some of the stalls had electric light but most had gas lamps which used to hiss. By 10 o'clock at night a lot of the country people made for home, but there would still be a good crowd on the High Street.

Another of my favourite places was the Barracks and the Stanks with the firing range along the side of the walls. The Barracks then was full of young soldiers training and to see them drilling and doing PE, firing their rifles on the range, getting shouted at by the sergeants and corporals, we thought that was great – we never gave the young lads at the other end of it a thought. They used to put the menu of the day on the wall at the Barracks gate every day. I often read this and thought "Poor souls – what terrible food." Bread, marg, tea, tea and custard. A few years later when I was called up because of the war, I could have done fine with that menu – I'm afraid sometimes we got a lot worse.

By 1936-37 everything changed in Walkergate and Chapel Street. The people were all rehoused in what was then the most modern council housing at Highfields, mainly called Abyssinia by the Berwick folk as the Italians had just invaded that country. Now they had bathrooms and electricity, proper cookers and stoves, and a small garden. But many of them were not happy. They were too far away from the centre of things. They missed the noise and the bustle and they missed Walkergate and Chapel Street where many of them had been born and had never lived anywhere else.

All the old slums were pulled down and the bus station was built on the site of most of them. That was the start of the changes in Berwick, but not for long – the war started and that stopped all the building changes in the town for a few years. It was also the end of my boyhood.

1937

In 1937 I left school and started work at Stoddarts as an apprentice grocer. We started at 8.30 and worked 'til 6 at night, half-day Thursday. The Stoddart family in the shop in those days were father William and son Jack, who I found to be very fair employers so long as you behave properly and did your work. Both of them were very kind to

me. When my mother was very ill and dying, old Mr Stoddart made me take a quarter bottle of champagne every day for her. I shall never forget him for that kindness. Although I didn't return to work there after my army service, the whole family of Stoddarts have remained friends ever since.

The manager of the shop in those days was Mr Elliot and the assistants were William Short, Douglas Nesbit, Mary Short, Sid Harris, another youngster who started his apprenticeship after me. The office was run by Mr Thomas Simpson. A real old Victorian – so was the office with its' very high desks and tall stools. His assistant was Miss Nellie Hunter. As the Stoddarts had a public bar and the Rum Puncheon restaurant there were quite a lot of staff. One I remembered most was Robert Dryden. He was the porter, cellarman and bottle washer, and a real Berwick.

During the war when I was in Italy I was lucky enough to get a few days leave in Rome. To get there we went in a three-tonner truck and had to go over a mountain pass. At the summit of this pass was a Nissen hut that the NAAFI ran for travellers like us. Here we stopped for tea and buns. I was one of the last soldiers in the queue when I heard a voice say "If you just want tea, over her" and it was in broad Berwick. There he was, Robert Dryden, serving tea and wads on a mountain top somewhere in Italy. We had a great reunion.

After starting work in 1937, life to me was great. I had money each week. With my friends I could go to the pictures, when we liked we could go to Edinburgh on Thursday afternoon by special train – the fare half a crown (11.5 pence) return. Fish and chips in Woolworths on Princes Street, then a show and back home to Berwick by half-past eleven.

The other big event was the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow. The staff at Stoddarts organised a bus and off we went to this wonderful place. I was wearing a new sports coat for the occasion and felt great. I had never been so far in a bus before. All went well until we got to the Exhibition when the skies opened, and it rained as if it had never rained before. All the colours in my new sports coat ran together – it certainly wasn't new when I got back home. For all that, we did enjoy ourselves.

At this time, the newspapers were all full of Hitler, Germany, war, peace, Italy had invaded Abyssinia. All very exciting for a young man who really didn't know what it would all mean to his, and millions of others lives, later.

At this time too, the slum tenements of Walkergate and Chapel Street were to be demolished. All the people who lived there were to be moved to a new council estate North of the town, Highfields. No-one used its' proper name. Because of Mussolini we called it Abyssinia. Another estate at Tweedmouth was nicknamed Czech.

The good life for me lasted two short years – in 1939 war was declared. Then came the blackout and rationing, the pictures were closed down at first in fear of air raids. The young men over 18 were volunteering or being called up to the forces. I was sixteen so couldn't go yet. We had

to do fire-watching – this meant sleeping in Stoddarts two nights a week in case of air raids. All we had was a helmet, a bucket and a stirrup pump. I don't know what we would have done if anything had happened.

By this time the Barracks and the new camp which had been built in the field were full of young men trying to be soldiers. This made the town very busy when the pictures did re-open – they were always full – the pubs and cafes did a great trade. The Berwick people themselves took many young soldiers to their homes for a meal or a bath, or just peace and quiet.

In those days, Walkergate, like most streets in Berwick, was still cobbled and many a night you would hear the sound of marching men. The sound of their studded boots hitting the cobbles – these men were going to the station for a train to war – France, Egypt, India – it was an eerie feeling, standing there in the dark, listening.

For the next year, life went on as best it could. We got used to no sweets or fruit, like oranges and bananas. Twice I sprained my ankle on some bad pavements. Now and then a German plane would fly over the town, possibly on reconnaissance, and once, firing at a Spitfire right over the High Street. Some bombs did drop on Berwick and Tweedmouth and unfortunately some people were killed. But it was nothing like the other cities and towns in this country suffered.

The other sad time was Dunkirk. The men who escaped were given leave and would arrive in the town just like they had left Dunkirk. People waited at the station and in doorways to see who would get off the trains. My own cousin, George, arrived home in a very poor state with shellshock. He eventually went back and fought in Italy and Germany. The next time I saw him was in Italy when he visited the gun site to bring me a present of cigarettes.

In 1942 I had to register for military service. Next, I got a notice to report for a medical examination at St Johns' Hall, Ashington. Ashington! – where was that?!

I was passed A1 although they did find I needed glasses. Very shortly after this I was eighteen and received my call-up papers. I was to report to the General Service Corps at Chester. Chester! I'd never been further than Glasgow or Newcastle! Train to Manchester, change - not only trains but stations – for the train to Chester. How would I do it? I made it. Chester. I spent six weeks in this lovely city, although Berwick has better walls.

Kitted out with battledress and all the etceteras. Square bashing, rifle drill, PT, spud peeling – just like the young men I saw at the Barracks at home doing the same thing. Why didn't they let me stay there! After six weeks I was posted to the Royal Artillery Regiment at Newtown, Wales – another foreign country!

Here we became gunners and for the rest six weeks learned all about the 25-pounder field gun which I was to live with for the next four years. When our training was finished, off we went again. I was given ten days leave. It took twenty-four hours to travel from Newtown to Berwick and another twenty four hours back again. That took two days off my leave.

When I got back to Newtown I found I had been posted to a place called Tibthorp, near Driffield in Yorkshire, so back up North again to join the 160 Battery R.A. B troop. Tibthorp was a few houses round a duck pond in the wilds of Yorkshire. But the Battery I joined had been stationed on the coast near Berwick and knew the town well, also some of the local lovelies - so I didn't feel at all strange.

After about a month with the 160 Battery, we all moved South to Exeter - further away from home again. We were there only a short while when we were all given embarkation leave - ten days.

After leave, back to Exeter, then by train from there to Greenock, Glasgow, to embark on the biggest ship I had ever seen. P.O. Ship Strathaird. I had never seen anything like it - the cabins, the staterooms, dining rooms. This is going to be great - until we found our mess - we were in a hold at the bottom of the ship where in peace-time they kept the luggage.

Twelve men at a table, hammocks hung over the table at night for sleeping - you can imagine the noise and the smell. Also the food was awful - except the lovely white bread, fresh every morning, and butter - something we hadn't seen for ages. Two men were detailed every day to collect the meals for the table, and when you were on this chore you had to be up before six in the morning and go and collect the bread and butter. This could be very tricky on the dark mornings as we had to go for what seemed miles up companionways, along decks, downstairs, all in the pitch dark. As the mornings got lighter it was good exercise.

We zig-zagged from Scotland over the North Atlantic nearly to America, then back to the South Atlantic to the West coast of Africa, berthing in Freetown, where we spent two days without getting off the ship. But all the traders came out to the ship in their little boats filled with all kinds of fruit, crafts etc... for sale.

From there, we sailed down the coast of Africa to Cape Town. Again, we weren't allowed ashore and only stayed a few hours. Then round the Cape and up to Durban, where we berthed to the sound of the Lady in White singing us a welcome.

Three great days in beautiful Durban where we were given lovely food and hospitality by the citizens.

From Durban, the convoy of ships split up - some going to India via the Indian ocean and we, up the Red Sea to Aden, where we took on coal and water. Then through the Suez Canal and Egypt, Port Tewfik where we disembarked onto a special train to take us to Cairo after nearly three months on a ship , which I really enjoyed. Back on dry land, and what a land! Me, a lad from Berwick, in the land of the Pharaohs.

When the train stopped at Giza station, an all marble affair, we were put into train-cars and taken down a very straight road right to the pyramids, where our tents were waiting. By this time it was dark and the moon was full. What a sight - the pyramids by moonlight.

Cairo, the noisiest city I have ever been in - with all the gears pulled by usually two poor horses, cars with their horns blaring, beggars of all kinds, bootblacks and street traders, touts looking for customers for the ladies of pleasure - for a laddie from Berwick it was a bit too much.

After about a week we were moved from the pyramids to an army camp at Heliopolis, a posh suburb of Cairo, where we retrained after our long journey.

Then the day came when we had to join Monty's' 8th Army in the desert, if we could catch them!

We left Cairo one morning in convoy, guns, trailers, everything, and had the most thrilling journey I've ever done. Through Egypt to El Alamein, Marsamatruh, Sidi Barrani into Libya, Tobruk, Derna, Banghazi, then into Tripoli, where we joined the 57th Field Regiment of Artillery. This took us, I think, about ten days. But it was great. We stopped every night by the Mediterranean, camping on the seashore, where we swam and ate, had a nights sleep and off in the morning up the desert.

We were just one week at Tripoli when we were suddenly packed into landing craft and told we were invading Sicily. That's when my real war started and it was HELL!