

A Community in Transition

Romsey Town, Cambridge 1966-2006



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This could not have been written without the help of many Romsey residents past and present. Thank you.

Note: Some names have been changed.

CHAPTER 1: Romsey Town - a short history

'It was said that one could be born and die in Romsey Town and have everything you needed in between without ever leaving Mill Road' - Wendy Maskell

King's College Chapel rises cathedral-like over Cambridge, a unique building renowned around the world for its music at Christmas. It is the symbol of the City. Many people believe that the University created Cambridge but the town existed long before the University arrived in 1284. 'Town' is older than 'gown'.

If you walk from the city centre across Parker's Piece, one of the most magnificent urban spaces in England, you will come to a legendary central lamp upon which is written "Reality Checkpoint". This is where gown ends and the town begins. Walk to the far corner of the Piece and follow Mill Road with its multi ethnic shops and after a few minutes you will come to a railway bridge. Over the bridge is Romsey Town - a dense community of narrow streets where many front doors open onto the pavement.

Romsey Town had its origins in the Enclosure Acts of the 1800s, which dismantled the open fields that had hemmed in the town for centuries (its first green belt). The small strips of land were re-assembled and many were sold for housing. The railway arrived in the mid nineteenth century and most of the houses were built between 1885 and 1895 with the street pattern following the old field boundaries. It was the era of high Empire, reflected in the names of the public houses - The Jubilee, The Empress - and in street names - Malta, Cyprus, Suez, and Hobart. The parallel rows of streets ended to the north in footpaths that led to the uninhabited Coldhams Lane and the empty Coldhams Common where coprolites were mined.

The railway divided Romsey Town from the city. The area grew as a distinct and self supporting community with its own shops, churches and leisure facilities. This created a sense of cohesion and community. It was a local, not a global world where work and leisure had to be within easy reach, where personal transport was limited to the bicycle, and television was in the distant future.

There were fine gradations within the terraces, and some streets had a better reputation than others. Width mattered - a frontage of 13 ft meant the front door opened into the front room, while 15 ft would give you a hallway and privacy. Most houses had three bedrooms, but in some access to the rear bedroom would be through the middle bedroom. Most toilets were outside, and the bathroom was a tub on the living-room floor once a week. The larger terraces - often home to the local elite, the engine drivers - had bay windows and front gardens. Nearly all had long gardens, not the small yards of central Cambridge.

As the side streets were cul de sacs most journeys were via Mill Road, and on foot, which led to a familiarity amongst neighbours. Mill Road was the central meeting point where residents would meet on their way to work, to the shops, or to school. By 1921 Romsey had a population of 7,000 and between the bridge and the end of Mill Road there were butchers, sausage-makers, fishmongers, bakers, a timber merchant, grocers, household furnishers, hardware stores, drapers, hairdressers, boot repairers, milliners, and a cycle shop. Other corner shops could be found in the side streets.

This was a self-contained world 'over the bridge'.

"Red Russia"

'This was always a Labour community and when they started singing The Red Flag, that was sort of connected with Romsey Town. This was called little Russia over here.'

Most early residents of Romsey worked either in the building industry or on the railways. The railway companies were the largest employers. They did not build Romsey, but an army of railway servants moved there - drivers, guards, boilermakers, platelayers, fitters, firemen, and clerks. With a guaranteed wage with chances of promotion, and a successful strike in 1919, they had a self-assurance that distinguished them from many of the traditional residents of Cambridge. Romsey was always more than a community of railway workers, but they came to define the area.

The sense of being a separate community was reinforced by Romsey's political identification with the Labour party. By 1921 the last Liberal councillors were defeated and Labour held all the local council seats. Voters on the town side of the bridge were far more deferential towards authority as many relied on work at the colleges where low wages were supplemented with perks and where union membership was banned. But Romsey's railwaymen and building tradesmen were heavily unionised, and this gave them a sense of solidarity, together with a belief in communal self help rather than dependence on handouts.

Romsey Town 1904



Romsey Town 1950



In 1926 4,000 Cambridge workers came out to support the national General Strike. A Conservative Councillor led a team of volunteer undergraduates to keep the trains running, while the railwaymen were described by the Master of Christ's College as a Bolshevik threat. The strike confirmed Romsey as 'Red' in the eyes of the rest of Cambridge, although family bonds were stronger than political affiliation. Romsey became known as 'Little Russia' and local residents adopted the name with pride as a mark of their independence from the paternalistic and conservative university.



Photo: Cambridgeshire Collection. Cambridge Libraries.

'Red Russia they used to call it - Over here it was nearly all railway workers, more than 70% I should say. You no longer see the driver walking up the street and over the bridge in his smart uniform with his little black box. They were big men like the engines they drove. They wore small donkey coats, well washed overalls and black horse skin caps.' M Nicholls

CHAPTER 2: Into the sixties

The 1926 General Strike seems part of history. The sixties seem (just) part of modern times, repeatedly hailed by cultural commentators as the years that broke the mould. Before, the images are black and white. After is the start of colour. In Cambridge the population had doubled again since the turn of the century, with new jobs in light engineering and public services bringing a gentle prosperity.

Romsey Town was different but still familiar. The railway tracks still marked a clear divide from central Cambridge but the now nationalised railway no longer dominated the area as it had before the war, and there was a greater spread of employment. Rows of terraces still greeted anyone crossing the bridge, although houses that families had moved into sixty years earlier were beginning to look small and dated.



But in the twenties and thirties new council estates were built around Romsey, hemming it in and making it feel like part of the inner city. The side streets now extended towards new arterial roads, while small terraces with their front door opening onto the pavement suddenly gave way to bay-windowed council houses set back behind front gardens.

Bill Briggs, railwayman and Romsey Labour councillor, had forcefully demanded that the council houses should be built with three rooms downstairs (the 'parlour debate') or they would become the slums of the future. He argued as one who had lived in a non parlour house and echoed the sentiments of the local Trades Council who believed "that such houses retard the moral and social advancement of the occupants."

The new inter-war housing diluted some of the cohesion within Romsey. The council houses had been filled with young families, upsetting the generational balance that had been established over the previous thirty years. Many came from the poorest parts of Cambridge, and some of the older residents saw the Council houses as "rough", filled with slum dwellers.

These distinctions remained in 1960, years after these estates had been built. But if Romsey was no longer clearly defined on the map, or by purely local employment, then the catchment area of the local schools and the pull of Mill Road continued to help local residents identify with the area where they lived. Shopping at the Co-op, playing on Romsey Rec, drinking in the Conservative Salisbury or the Labour Club still provided shared points of contact, while Mill Road bridge and the memory of 'Red Russia' remained a clear boundary between Romsey and the rest of Cambridge.

Romsey in the sixties: Sue's story

"The women had time to stand and gossip, and spend hours along Mill Road, everybody knew everybody's business." - Sue

Sue was born in 1959. She lived in a small terraced house in Great Eastern Street, named after the neighbouring railway line. Still only in her forties today, her childhood in the sixties seems part of another era. Her mother was from Romsey Town, and worked from the day she left school just over the bridge as an auxiliary at the Maternity Hospital.

Her father was Welsh, and after he met her mother at a Mill Road dancehall the young couple moved in with Sue's grandfather. He lived and worked in Romsey as a milkman for a nearby dairy, and this proximity of employment, leisure and home repeated the pattern of earlier generations. So too did the family support mechanisms which were part of the traditional Romsey working-class culture. These were born of necessity and nourished by custom, and while they could be strengths they could also be the cause of much tension. Sue's parents could not get on with her grandfather and 'his rules', and they were threatening to separate when her other grandfather lent them £60. This became the deposit on the £625 price of the small terrace where Sue was born. Her memories of the house in the sixties are stark: "The first things I can remember about our house was nothing! We didn't have anything much. The kitchen was very stark, we had a cooker, and one of those cabinets, everyone had a cabinet, with a fold down flap, and that was yellow, you made your sandwiches and everything on that."

There was a kitchen, a 'middle room' where they ate, and a front room. Upstairs were three bedrooms, one for her parents, one for her two brothers, and her small room at the back. The strongest memories are of the kitchen and the middle room (described as 'not the posh

room') of the house because that was where the family lived. The TV which her parents watched in the evenings (no daytime TV then) was in this room. The back door was the main entrance to the house. The front door was unused. It opened straight off the street into the front room, 'the tidy room', which was reserved for important events.

Facilities were basic, although "we had a gas fridge, that's something else that really sticks in my mind, we had a gas cooker and a gas fridge, because I've never seen a gas fridge since." Her mother did all the laundry by hand, hanging it up to dry over a pulley above the coal fire in the middle room. "We didn't have a washing machine, there was a Butler sink, and I can remember being out the back with my mum and she would get me to turn the handle on a mangle."



The toilet was out the back too: "If we went to the loo in the night we had a potty. I think we emptied it, or maybe Mum did when we were little. It was a brick toilet, painted black and white with just a loo in it." Nor was there a bath. "The bath tub hung up on a hook out the back, and sometimes my mum used to do the sheets in it. Baths twice a week. The water was heated with an Ascot. I remember it was a big old white thing... I had two elder brothers, so I always got the clean water, that's another thing I can remember. I always got first, because I was the girl, and they had to go in after, together."

"We used to go over the bridge to the Baths, when I was older. You'd go there on a Sunday. There was a woman there, and you had a little individual cubicle, and you could shout if you wanted more water, I think she supplied soap and a towel. It's awful; it's hard to believe! Scabby kids! Nobody else had it any different to how we did, it's how it was."

"I remember a woman down the road called Hilda, she got this little square washing machine, and that's all it was, a square washing machine, and it had a mangle, an automatic mangle on the top...I can see myself pushing this square washing machine from Hilda's to our house so that we could borrow it. And that was amazing, it had a separate spinner, so the clothes were washed, and there was this automatic mangle on the top, then you spun them out afterwards."

"We always played in the road, you got up in the morning and you had breakfast and you just went out to play. You probably went back at lunch time, but there was no 'Where you going?', nobody needed to know where you were because you just went off to play." Romsey Town still felt distinct. There was only one car in the road, and only one telephone, most journeys were still on foot and face to face contacts with neighbours and nearby family - love them or loathe them - were still very much part of everyday life: "You knew everybody, and everybody knew everybody."

With few labour saving gadgets housework was woman's work, and a full time job. Sue's mother did the washing, cleaning, shopping and cooking, and would then go out to work when her father returned home. She was also the prime carer, looking after the three children, and walking daily down Mill Road to help her wheelchair-bound mother. The house and the street were the women's preserve during the daytime: "They were always in

each other's, everybody was always in our house, all the women. And as soon as my dad came home from work they used to go, always. Dozens of kids everywhere. It's hard to believe we all got in that little room." Beyond the street, Mill Road continued to be a wider focal point. It was a daily destination in an age before freezers, or supermarkets when meals still consisted of meat and two veg, everybody 'bought fresh' and 'nobody had a car to go any further.'

On Mill Road were vegetable shops, an electrical shop, a haberdashery, a furniture shop, an ironmongers, a barbers, a cycle shop, a bakers, butchers and the Co-op, the biggest store ("I can still remember the number, isn't it funny - 49509. Don't forget your divi number!"). Christmas was memorable for toys from the toy shop where her mother saved all year at the Christmas Club, while across the road at the Continental Shop run by post-war eastern European refugees there would be a big barrel of live eels: 'I remember that so well.' It was a world of trust: "A family moved in down the road, I can't remember their name, and they had a small baby. And the next day me and this girl Deborah, we went and knocked on the door, and we said 'Can we take the baby for a walk?' and she gave us her baby! Can you imagine it now! 'Bring it back at 12.00 for dinner'. 'OK'. We got a clean nappy and a pair of rubbers, and you just pushed this baby about quite happily. It would never happen now. But then people let you do it, they trusted you to do it." It was a world where children were naughty but 'you didn't pinch anything short of Corona bottles' (for the 3d deposit), and 'anything you did wrong it was 'Oh, I'll tell your mum.' And you were frightened of her. She had a stick. And we got it!

But although Sue's memories of Romsey in the sixties are of 'good times', she recognises: "they can say it was happier, but I'm sure it must have been much harder. You wouldn't do that now, I wouldn't want to! It was hard, I'm sure it was very hard for my mum... people just wouldn't go back to it would they?"

CHAPTER 3: Home Improvements: Into the seventies

Ralph and Maureen's Story:

"He was playing football on the Rec, I'd got my little cousin on the swings, he waved at me, and I waved back, and that was sort of it. I was 15, he was 20! We were engaged when I was 16 and married when I was 21." Maureen

Ralph was brought up in one of the 19th century terraces near the Recreation Ground. On the day that he was playing football - 'I was sport mad' - his future wife Maureen had been looking after her young cousin. She decided to walk to the swings from the council houses where she lived on the other side of Mill Road. Today no parent would let their child venture so far from home, or risk crossing Mill Road with its steady stream of traffic.

Ralph and Maureen were married in the early sixties. Ralph's was a traditional Romsey railway family. His parents had moved to the area from another railway town, March, when his father had been promoted to Works Inspector: "Romsey itself was called Railway Town, Railway City,

Red Russia was another name it got. The air's lovely and fresh, but you used to just get that sulphur smell too." They bought a house in the street next to where he had been brought up. "We wanted to buy. My father rented privately, Maureen's father was in a Council house, but my father always said 'You don't want to rent, it will never be your own'. But on the other side of the coin people used to say 'Oh, you ought to get a Council house, they do all your repairs for you'. But we went with my parents, we got a mortgage."

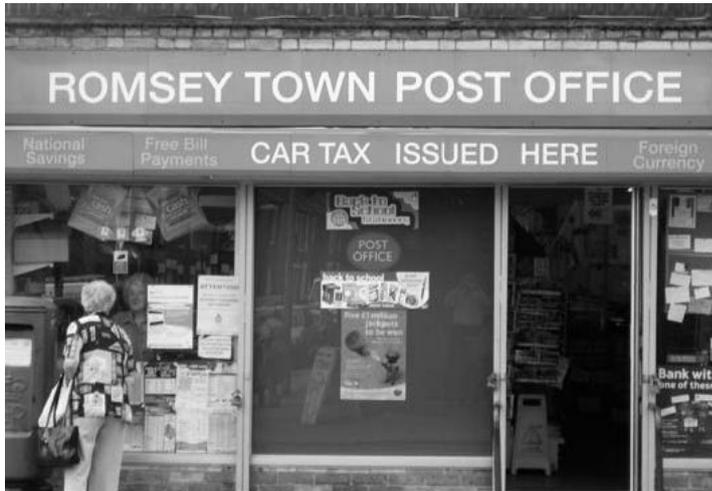
Getting a mortgage wasn't easy as Ralph only earned £11-6-0 (£11.30) a week and the house cost £2,375. He could just about afford it because he supplemented his wages with Sunday work, but most Building Societies would not take overtime earnings into consideration. One did, although it still insisted on the minimum 10% deposit that was then normal, and they were able to buy the superior terrace with a bay window and small front garden in one of the most sought-after streets in Romsey.

When they moved in they had very few possessions: "We didn't have a carpet. We had bare boards and a little bit of lino. We had people come round one night and we had to sit on the floor, we only had two little fireside chairs. We had Mum's secondhand cooker in the kitchen, and a spin drier, no washing machine, everything had to be done by hand, sheets and everything."

The house needed modernising, and through the sixties and seventies Ralph slowly improved and adapted it. The bathroom and toilet had been accessed through a sliding door from the kitchen and one of the first things they did was to knock the bathroom out and move it upstairs. He did this by sub dividing the back bedroom, which left them a small third



bedroom so that his two children could each have their own room (unlike in many earlier generations where large families often led to two or even three children sharing until they left home).

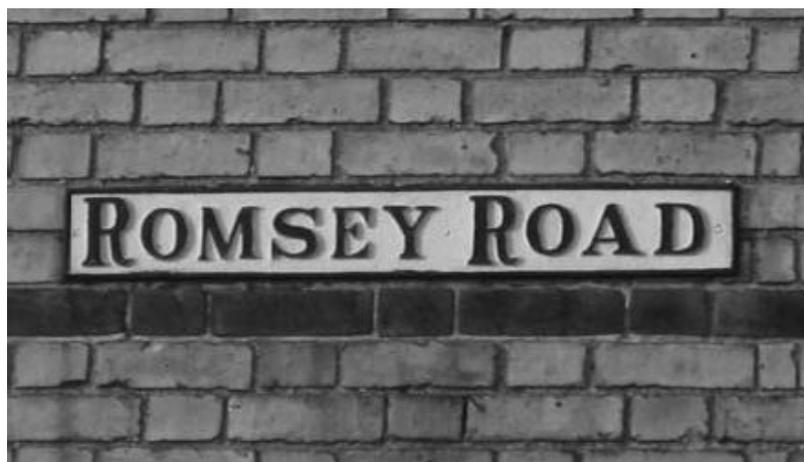


In the seventies he knocked out the dividing wall between the two downstairs rooms to create a larger living area, and put in central heating to heat the bigger space. Later he added an extension to the rear of the kitchen. It was a street of families many of whom were also improving their homes, and they helped each other out: "We were neighbourly. I didn't do John's for money, I helped him do it. We put windows in John's place, put

fences up. Same as when I built my extension. My mates all lived round here, if you knew a plumber, I'd go round and do their brickwork and they'd come round to do my plumbing. Ralph has carried the values of respect and neighbourliness through his adult life, but no longer feels that these are shared by those who are moving into the area. He is now more at ease down in Norfolk where they spend much of the summer in their caravan: "I've got to say this, people in Cambridge today only talk to you if they want something. You go down to Norfolk and they're so obliging. If you run for a bus in Cambridge it keeps going, if you run for a bus in Norfolk it stops, and if it's pouring with rain they'll stop outside the old lady's house."

It was self-help that recognised the benefits of exchanging labour and skills, rooted in a sense of belonging to a local community: "You never mentioned money. Everybody kept to their promise, they didn't let you help them and then not turn up at yours. That's how it was."

Family was important too. Ralph's mother continued to live in the next street where he could keep an eye on her until she was 80: "I used to walk the dog through the Rec, walk up Ross Street, see if my mum was alright, then come round the block, and then to work. The neighbourly thing was good, you can see a big gap."



Ralph still walks around the Rec where he played football as a teenager and where he met Maureen. It had been the centre of his leisure activities as a child, where he bonded with his mates who remained friends as adults, and where he learnt to respect not disregard the police: "I preach this to the kids today when you hear them swearing and blinding, our Coppers, Coppers in those days, they'd come on the Rec and we'd be playing, and off would

come the tunic top and they'd be in goal. We respected them all, and they respected us. We never had no trouble."

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CHAPTER 4: Improving the Area: The seventies and eighties

Ralph wasn't the only one altering his house. During the seventies Sue's father knocked out the dividing wall between the rooms downstairs, ending the segregation between a 'tidy' front room and a living room at the rear. He also built a 'lean-to' at the back of the house for storage, and installed a bathroom in the kitchen where the outside toilet had been. A neighbour helped with the 'lean-to', her brother who was training to be a plumber helped with the bathroom. Like Ralph, the labour and skills of neighbours and family made alterations affordable.

By the mid-seventies Romsey was beginning to look old fashioned to many, 'like Coronation Street.' For every house that was improved, there was another that was becoming unfit for habitation. Amongst the problems were the bad condition of some of the thirties council houses, and the number of older terraces that were privately rented by landlords with little incentive, or little capital, to modernise their properties - about one in four were privately rented in 1977.



Nor could any home improvements compare with the facilities of the new houses that were being built across Cambridge and in the outlying villages on council and private estates. With rising incomes and increasing car ownership there was no longer any need to live within walking distance of work, or of the shops. Post-war planning policies led to a surge of house building in the villages beyond the Green Belt rather than in the city. Older residents stayed, and their children might stay too. But Romsey was no longer an area for an aspirational young couple to start a family home.

Sue's father didn't move to the countryside, but he bought his first car in 1971. At first it stood proudly and nearly alone in the street. But slowly the elderly who didn't drive or could not afford a car died, and were replaced by those for whom a car was an essential part of late 20th century life. The cul de sac where Sue had played as a child became choked with parked cars, and in other once quiet through streets residents found themselves living in

'rat runs'. Even worse, as they became dependent on cars, or found that they had no choice but to be dependent on cars, they found they couldn't park THEIR car outside THEIR house. Slowly the absence of garages or off street parking in terrace houses that abutted the pavement became as big an issue as the absence of bathrooms or inside toilets.



A General Improvement Area (GIA): The eighties

If Romsey had always felt it had a separate identity, it was starting to become an identity based on neglect and a feeling of deprivation rather than pride. A survey of 1,871 Romsey houses in 1977 revealed nearly one in three (583) still lacking one or more basic amenity, and one in five (343) as being unfit for habitation.

The City Council proposed creating a General Improvement Area (GIA) as the solution and the Romsey GIA was declared in 1981. This marked a recognition that the earlier policy of total clearance of older properties was neither appropriate nor affordable. It recognised that rehabilitation was a better option and that with improvements the life span of the Romsey houses could be extended by thirty years or more. It also recognised that in the process communities were not broken up, and that communities were more than the houses people lived in. GIAs were not magic wands, but for the first time they offered help to improve not just houses but the wider local infrastructure.

Merryn's Story: The Middle Classes Move in

"There are three aspects of generally improving the older housing areas, of which the General Improvement Areas are intended under the terms of the Housing Act (1969). Two aspects are obvious, being the improvement of the houses themselves and of the environment in which they stand. The third is the involvement of the people living in the houses." - Cambridge General Improvement Areas (Cambridge City Council)

Merryn burst into tears on her first night in Romsey. She had moved to the area from London in February 1980 with her husband and two-year-old child. It was cold, there was no central heating, they couldn't walk on the kitchen floor because it had been re-concreted, and the boiler burst the first time they turned it on. But, "I also remember that I instantly felt at home both in the house and in the area."



The next day she went shopping and was "struck by how friendly and chatty the shopkeepers were. We liked the idea that we were living in Romsey Town - separate from Cambridge, with its own particular character." Their first months in another part of the city had been disheartening: "That part of Cambridge felt bleak to me. It also felt like it could have been anywhere - any suburban development on the outskirts of any English town. Romsey had a totally different feel to it. It had "character". The old Cambridge brick houses were huddled together in a way which made you feel it would be impossible not to be neighbourly here." Affordability was an issue too. When they had asked the estate agent why a similar house on the other side of the bridge was more expensive he had replied that Romsey was 'not the most favoured area of Cambridge'.

Merryn moved to Romsey for many of the reasons that the children of older inhabitants were leaving. Where she saw 'character' in the old terraces and narrow streets, they saw tiny houses and no parking spaces. She saw Victorian features "including a lovely open fire-place with picture tiles, the original wood panelled doors (which we lovingly stripped by hand over the years, leaving them with a warm golden glow) and a nicely patterned tiled floor in the porch." For others these were old-fashioned relics that should be thrown out.



She "discovered a lot of young families rather like ourselves moving into the area - teachers, social workers, university researchers - educated, middle class, leftish wing, with houses full of books and musical instruments, but not a lot of money." Others saw this as an alien takeover by a different class with different values. It was the start of what is now called gentrification.

Merryn recognised the problems of being 'incomers': "We were well aware of the fact that there was already an established community here into which - by reason of education, interests and lifestyle - we did not really fit and who probably resented the fact that they and their families were being priced out. At the same time, it was this feeling of community that we particularly valued in Romsey and we were anxious to be an accepted part of it."

Merryn was probably typical of the first middle-class incomers. She was new to Cambridge, wanted to meet other families with young children and shared interests, and wanted to be part of the wider community. So with other 'incomer housewives' she joined 'Romsey Neighbours', visiting new families who moved into the area and helping elderly residents with shopping, gardening or redecorating. In turn the GIA officer visited her.

Minimal consultation during the first Cambridge GIA had sparked a protest. To avoid a similar response in Romsey a residents consultative group was seen as a priority and one of the proposed mediums for engaging as many as possible was a local newsletter. Merryn was enthused: "I immediately thought, "Yes! I could do this." I had the time, I enjoyed writing and it would give me a chance to get out and about and meet local people." The Newsletter was called 'Over the Bridge', and Merryn became its Editor.

She found Romsey in the early eighties a-buzz with community groups, few of which would have been found in the sixties: "the local political parties, (Labour and Liberal - not many Conservatives about) were very active, there was CND, Mums & Toddlers, Babysitting Circles, a toy library and a 'skills swap' scheme. It's true that you generally saw the same faces everywhere you went, but they were not all middle-class incomers. The residents of Ross Street (thirties council housing) set up a group and organised a street party to celebrate the Charles/Diana wedding."

'Over the Bridge' publicised these activities, along with details of proposed improvements. The lack of greenery was addressed. The problem of large trucks using the narrow streets as through-roads was raised, and the noise from local businesses was discussed. All these issues came together in 1986 with the 'Romsey Local Plan', designed to "protect and enhance the quality of life in Romsey." This led in the 1990s to traffic calming measures in the side streets designed to discourage their use as 'rat-runs'.



One of the significant differences between 1980 and 2006 is that then Romsey houses were still affordable on one middle-class income. With universal child care dreamed of only by a few Merryn had little option - and accepted and could afford - her role as housewife. Despite being a middle-class incomer she was tied to the home. She looked to the immediate neighbourhood in a way very similar to older working-class residents, and very different from someone of her class today. These bonds are looser now because most couples, even those with children, are working. They see the home only in the evenings where it is a haven to relax rather than a base from which to go out and meet others in the broader local community.

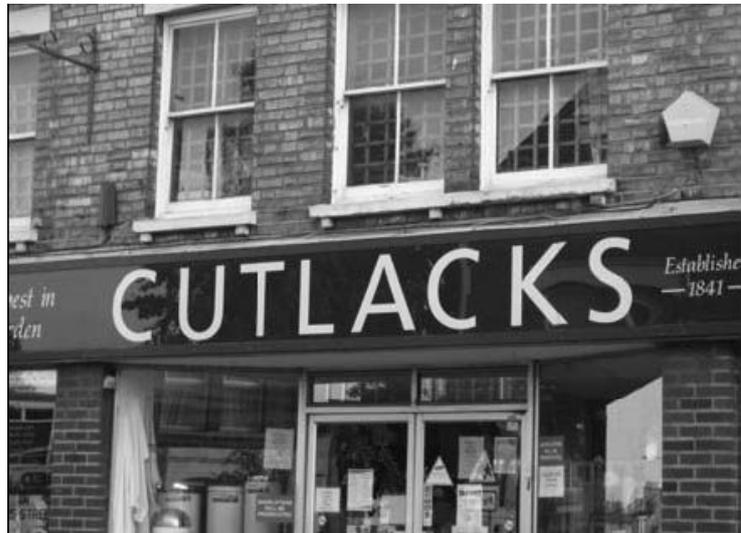
"Small wafers of shedding pine, cheerful gingham patchwork quilts and the tap of mallet on lintel were an immediate reminder that summer is the season of rebirth for Romsey's cottage industries. It is true that nearly everyone in Romsey lives in a terraced house yet everyone is busy every hour that the local Labour Party spends trying to restore their

residences to what they never were in the first place: hence Romsey's main cottage industry is cottages." From: Over the Bridge (1985)

CHAPTER 5: Towards the 21st century

"We chose Romsey because it was cheap, the Council rates were low and there were grants available for improvements " - Jeanette

Jeanette and her husband bought their first home together in Romsey in 1979. Cambridge born, they were drawn to Romsey not because of family connections but because it was affordable and had potential. At 24 she was a pharmacy technician, her husband, 30, a photographer.



"The house was in a poor state, we had to have a new damp-proof course, timber treatment, much of the flooring was rotten.

The bathroom was downstairs

and opened into the kitchen so that had to be changed. We also had to have central heating put in, a new roof and loft insulation, all of which we received grants for (not the heating)." Eight years later (1987) they added one of the first loft conversions in the area. There are many others now.

As a young mother Jeanette found "the local facilities were great, school at the end of the road, shops near by, playgroups. I attended the GIA meetings and was involved with the 'Over the Bridge', delivering and contributing. I was a Governor at St. Philip's school for nine years and was heavily involved with the playgroup." The availability of improvement grants had drawn them to Romsey, and involvement with the GIA helped to bond them into the area.

At the same time that Jeanette saw in the older terraces - with tax funded subsidies - a chance to buy a family home, Steve, living in a council house next to the Common, also became an owner occupier - with the tax funded subsidies of 'Right to Buy': "My mother had died and they said I had to move out and we were offered a flat, but I was a single parent, and I liked Romsey, and my son grew up there and wanted to stay there, so I took advantage of the right to buy. But it was a fear, going into the unknown."

Twenty-five years earlier Steve's family had been able to move to Romsey close to his grandparents because of the large stock of Council houses in the area. But with every Council house that was sold, keeping the traditional extended family networks together that had made up the 'community' that Merryn found so attractive became more difficult.

With a diminishing stock of housing and ever more stringent requirements on whom they had to house, Council housing in the eighties and nineties became the preserve of those with greatest need and - often - the greatest problems. Despite wanting to stay in Romsey Steve found himself coming home from work to noisy neighbours. The area had always had

high housing densities, but both the formal and informal social controls now seemed to be slipping away. Unable to relax, 'on edge all the time', he moved away in 1990 to a private housing estate: "I can go home and I've got wonderful neighbours all around me, I go home and there is peace."



Romsey Road Street Party. Photo: Cambridge Evening News

CHAPTER 6: Romsey Town in 2006 - The Ugly, the Bad, and the Good

Steve found the community that he grew up in dissolving, and left. He was not alone.

Others could not leave, and are resentful. Ralph blames the prevalence of 'Buy to Let', with many houses now rented out on short leases to students or young single people: "As soon as you got the student lets it's just gone down. The signs are abandoned rubbish sacks, wheelie bins left on the pavement, uncared for back gardens." Gardens are seen as important in areas of high-density terraced housing. Often the largest space in the home, they are a place for children to play, for adults to relax outside in privacy or for families to meet around barbecues. Ralph had 'a nice lawn, but it never got the sun because the students next door let their garden become overgrown, so I took it all up and put a patio down. It is not nearly so nice.'

Ralph finds the deterioration of parts of the physical environment threatening and feels unsupported by the local Councillors. Neither he nor his wife were directly involved in politics, but they remember a former Labour councillor as "'a people's man, not like they are today", and Maureen fondly recalls that when she started work at a University department the boss said: "Oh, Red Russia girl!" Lib Dems, not Labour, now win elections in Romsey. Their priorities may not be very different from Ralph's, but he feels no connection.



Ralph is not alone. Roy and Sandra are in their fifties, and moved back to Romsey twenty eight years ago after a brief spell on a distant council estate. They missed Romsey because "if you went to the Co-op and came back it took you an hour because you just knew everybody and you just chatted! It was a village, it was families." But now, "we know our own generation that's still here, but there's more students now, its not got the same atmosphere. We're trying to run a

Residents Association and get people to join in, but it's really hard because a lot of the people who live here don't have a commitment."

Roy, like Ralph, blames absent owner landlords: "They don't see what it looks like, they don't care what it looks like, they're not really bothered, they're just in it for making money. So you go around and it just looks scruffy. It doesn't bother them. But WE have to live with it."

Complaints are not just from traditional residents either:

Ellen, 30, moved to Bury St Edmunds in despair at the failure of her (resident-abroad) landlord to maintain her rented house, problems with neighbours and late night drug raids down the street.

Ian moved into the area in the nineties, with his wife and young family, but moved out five years later "due to the amount of houses rented to students. Various noisy neighbours made life miserable and with much sadness we left to get some peace." With similar disappointment the daughter of one of the eighties middle-class incomers had bought a house in the area but "no longer feels that it would be a good place to bring up children. Too many of the houses have been given out for rent and she has concerns about the purposes to which some of these houses have been put." Recent well-publicised raids on brothels confirm her fears.

Being in the catchment area of a failing secondary school for the last decade has also had an impact. This may now be improving, but Bridget with two children at the local primary school, sees friends fighting to obtain places in feeder schools for the secondary school in the town centre: "This undermines the sense of community. I think residents would get to know each other better if their children went to the same school. The secondary school situation has not benefited Romsey, and this is the reason some parents leave the area. But I am really pleased to see the local secondary school is on the way up at last."

And the Good!

In contrast many residents are far more positive.

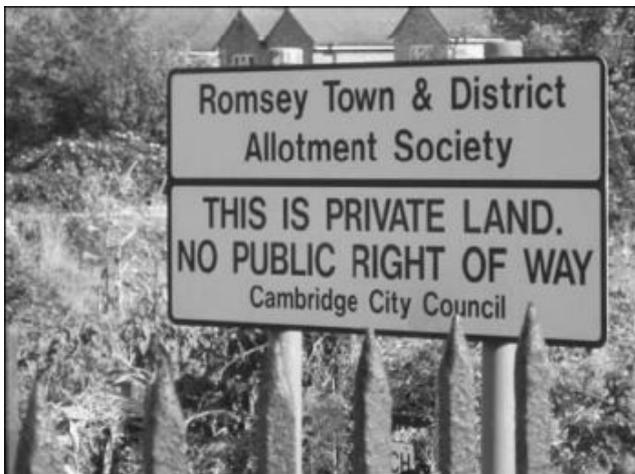
Andy was bought up in a Romsey Council house in the sixties. When he was first married they lived on another council estate: "The people over there are appalling, drugs, burglaries, theft of vehicles, it's totally different. I wouldn't live there if you paid me." He requested a transfer back to Romsey: "Oh the difference is chalk and cheese. Everything is on top of you in Romsey. Mill Road, excellent for shopping. You've got Sainsburys, Asda, and the new

Tesco, everything within ten minutes. The town centre, the bus station, the rail station, everything is close by. I wouldn't move out of Romsey Town."

Andy may now be in a minority but at 45 his lifestyle is not very different from that of previous generations of Romsey residents. His father came to Cambridge as a railwayman; he lives around the corner from the street where his parents still live and is married to the girl he knew as a teenager and he enjoys having shops and services within easy reach. Perhaps one of the bigger differences is that also around the corner live a number of Asian families and that nearly 9% of Romsey inhabitants are described in the 2001 census as 'non-white'. Elizabeth lives with her husband and two children five minutes walk from Andy's house. An editor for a local publisher she moved to Romsey in 1992 because it was affordable and because she liked the Victorian houses.



In 2005 Elizabeth knocked down the side wall of her terraced kitchen and extended it across what was the patio to give more living space. Unlike Sue's childhood in the 1960s "there aren't many children in our street. It would be nice if the kids could go more freely between houses of people very near, but there aren't many." But the contrast with her earlier life in the suburbs remains stark: "People in the street say 'hello'. Also, it always feels safe. I like it that there are always people on the streets at midnight. What a contrast to my previous home in Stapleford, where you didn't see a soul after 8pm!"



Elizabeth has an allotment nearby, and so does Heather who moved to Romsey from London in 2003. They wanted somewhere affordable and close to a railway station: "We moved from a very small flat in London to what seemed like a palace - a two bedroomed house in Romsey. The garden is small but the allotment provides space: We use it a lot for getting together with friends, we have a fire here, we have barbecues, picnics, and the kids run around here a lot, we've got a little paddling pool. We

love it. I'm a keen gardener, so I enjoy just being able to get my hands in the soil."

Bridget likes the convenience of being able to walk and cycle 'to town, to the shops, to the school, to the station, to the cinema, pubs and swimming pool. The streets feel secure and the children can visit friends by themselves and have more independence than many children the same age. We can live our daily lives without having to rely on the car.'

Others like the buzz of Mill Road. Mary "chose to live in Romsey Town because we immediately fell in love with the house and its proximity to the multicultural buzz of Mill Road. The house, a three-bedroom end of terrace had previously housed three male students who had littered the garden with beer cans and bottles and painted life-sized drawings of naked women on the walls. We pulled out the pink bathroom suite, sanded the floors and painted the house from top to toe. I love sitting in my garden watching the world go by, saying hello to my neighbours. We're connected by our gardens, our wheelie bin routes and the walls of our houses. We borrow chairs, feed each other's cats and share stories of our lives. I love the fact we live on the right side of the bridge - I feel that it's edgier than the other side - not quite so smug, prim and proper. There's nothing that I like more than the fact that I'm known in a few shops - they know what paper I read, the content of my favourite sandwich and that I like an extra shot in my coffee. I take great pleasure in chatting to my neighbours - it all adds up to feeling like I have a sense of belonging. It feels like home."



For Ralph and Mary, Andy and Roy much depends on their immediate experience in the street around them, rather in the wider 'Romsey Town'. Perhaps that is the chief distinction between 1966 and today. They may have friends nearby but their horizons extend over the bridge and beyond the tight networks of family and shared workplace of earlier residents. Even Ralph now drives to shop at a superstore, and has another 'community' around his caravan site in Norfolk.

Advancing into the Past

Iain and Gillian moved to Romsey in 2000.

"We were both well into our careers and our thirties before we could afford what might have been considered in the past a starter home. The other night I was flicking through a book of memories of 'Old Cambridge' and a subtitle grabbed my eye. It said, "In those days many houses had open fires..." I found this funny because as part of our redecoration of our semi-detached Victorian house in Romsey, we re-opened the fire in the front room. Again, this room was recreated by us putting a wall back in place that had been removed, probably in the seventies. The open fire is not really an affectation: because we chose the bare floorboards fashionable in houses today, in winter the house can be genuinely cold even with the central heating system on full and the fire seems necessary. Sometimes we advance into the past."

CHAPTER 7: Summing Up

Len's Story: 1960-2006

Len's journey seems to sum up the changes that have taken place in Romsey over the past forty years.

"In terms of money, up until about 1960 people always lived from hand to mouth. There were no bank accounts in my family. And now both my children have got bank accounts, they seem to have savings, they've finished college - they went to college, like 40% of people now."

"What an enormous revolution it's been for someone like me. From an outside tap and an outside toilet to a house which has heating, hot water, shower, bath, and some savings. I don't have to worry about money like I did. That's amazing. And two toilets!"

Len's story reflects the social changes that have happened in Romsey since 1960. Born during the Second World War his childhood was spent amongst his extended working class family. When he lived with his grandmother he accepted the outside tap



and the outside toilet, coal fires and gas lighting as normal: "It worked. So though it seems a great hardship I don't think it was really." There was no electricity: "Until I was 13 I didn't live in a house with electricity. And I can remember being in a house, and switching on the light, and switching it off, and just being absolutely amazed by this thing, this simple act that you could turn a light on and off."

As a teenager in the early sixties he moved in with his Uncle and Aunt a few minutes walk from where he now lives. There was no bathroom and washing was done either in the kitchen sink, or, like Sue, over Mill Road bridge at the public baths. The kitchen was tiny, and the family lived and ate in the back room. Money was always scarce: "The main problem was lack of money to buy things, so if you wanted new shoes you had to save up, or else you'd get them on the tick, but that was unusual."

The upbringing was typical of earlier Romsey generations. But Len was a beneficiary of the sixties expansion of higher education. He went to college, got a degree, became a research assistant at Cambridge University, and finally an electronics lecturer. It gave him enough money to buy his own house and he moved back to Romsey in 1978. He still lives in the detached house he bought. Built at the same time as the surrounding terraces, it was once a farmhouse for the local dairy. Len has modernised and extended it to provide a contemporary family home where he and his wife have bought up their two children. There is a big living room and a kitchen you can eat in. His children each had separate bedrooms, and there is a bathroom: "Some of the greatest times actually were bathing the kids, putting them in the bath, letting them splash around, plastic ducks...we've got two loos. How ridiculous is that! We've got one downstairs and one upstairs. In my uncle's house there was one outside. On cold winters night you got hardened to it, but it was not as comfortable as the choice of not even having to go downstairs, I can go to the toilet upstairs! What luxuries they are in comparison."

At the rear of the house some of the cow-sheds have been converted into accommodation, and the remaining open barn recently hosted a group of Peruvian children playing brass instruments. At the front of the house overlooking the garden he has recently built a conservatory where they now eat most days.

Len has become middle class. So has much of Romsey. It is part of the story of the last forty years. The hidden story is the fate of those children of the traditional working class residents who remained in manual jobs. Some still live in the area. But many more are dispersed to distant villages where houses are cheaper because facilities are inferior. Providing the labour to service the booming Cambridge economy, they are excluded from its benefits.



CHAPTER 8: Conclusions

Romsey Town has only existed for 120 years. It was a new community that quickly forged a clear sense of identity. In part physical and in part social and political, this identity was strong enough to survive the inter-war expansion and into the sixties. It remains today as an historic memory that helps to distinguish the area from other parts of Cambridge.

Forty years ago much of Romsey could have joined the redevelopment programme that saw streets of Victorian terraces demolished elsewhere in the city. Instead the boost of being declared a General Improvement Area coupled with the success of the Cambridge economy gave the area a new life. Existing residents like Ralph adapted their houses to modern standards. Young middle-class couples like Jeanette or Merryn and their husbands, aspiring to be owner-occupiers, moved in. Both groups accepted smaller houses than their contemporaries who were moving to surrounding villages in exchange for the convenience of local facilities and proximity to the city centre.



Romsey looks very similar today to the way it looked in the sixties. But the social composition of the area has changed dramatically. The last forty years have seen the traditional working-class residents in retreat. But those living in council houses have a security of tenure that gives them stability and they remain a significant part of the community. Ironically the successful regeneration of the area has made owner-occupation unaffordable on manual wages while the 'right to buy', although benefiting those who took it up, leaves a diminished number of family houses to rent. The first middle class incomers were public sector workers. They moved to Romsey because it was run down and cheaper than any other part of Cambridge. Few of them could afford to buy their own houses today if they were beginning again on their present incomes. Rising house prices encouraged by the local housing shortage and easy access to the railway station, are making Romsey home to a new class of young, higher paid professionals, often London commuters.

As expectations and incomes have escalated terraces have been adapted with bathrooms and toilets. Central heating has made more rooms habitable and given privacy undreamed of when everyone clustered in 'the middle room'. Small terraces that were once full of children are now home to childless couples, while loft conversions and extensions, workshops and garden 'offices' have made other houses suitable for 21st century families with all their possessions. Victorian fireplaces and pine-panelled doors have been restored. Wooden sash windows have replaced the aluminium windows that replaced the original sash windows. The houses reflect the changing values of their inhabitants.

Romsey retains a street pattern, a neighbourhood shopping centre based around Mill Road, and a clear green boundary at Coldhams Common that make it unique in Cambridge. It has a clear physical identity and many points of contact - pubs, clubs, two community centres, allotments, two primary schools, pre-school nurseries and after-school clubs. One of the most important meeting places remains the 'Rec', where dog walkers, joggers and basketball players rub shoulders with teenagers 'hanging out' or playing football. On the route to and from the primary school it is also where parents and children pause to chat.



But the social cohesion of forty years ago has been weakened by increased mobility, rising prices and the peculiarities of the Cambridge housing market that have encouraged landlords to buy former family homes and transform them into bedsits for a transient population of young people. The young people provide the 'buzz' and maintain the shops, pubs and cafes on Mill Road that make the area so attractive to many newcomers. But if their numbers, cars and parties overwhelm the traditional residents or the middle-class professionals, or absorb too many houses that could be family homes, then the delicate balance will be destroyed.

Yet although the balance is under pressure, where it works the streets of Romsey can provide the same sense of community that they did for Sue forty years ago. Charlie is a teacher, and he says:

"It has an absolutely wonderful sense of community and certainly for our children they've formed amazing good friendships on the street. There are kids down the road, kids up the

road. I particularly like the long hot summer days and evenings when all the kids are on the pavement. There isn't much traffic on the road at all. Not just the children, when we first moved in we were asked across to an open house party for the street. It seemed to typify the atmosphere, it's a very warm, welcoming atmosphere."

"We looked for a house in a number of villages. But our kids were adamant that they wanted to stay round here. Before we moved here we were told a lot about the wonderful community feel, and at the time I thought 'Everybody talks like that about where they live', but it has proved to be true."

The last land for a major development opportunity in Romsey has recently come on the market. Roy and the Community Group would like to see family houses and green spaces: "You need green spaces. I don't know what it is about it, but when you see green open spaces it is just different, a nice atmosphere." Others would like to repeat the tall, barrack-like blocks of flats that have already been built by the railway. In reality there is a need for family housing, and for housing for single people - rented and private. How this land is developed will impact on the whole area and help shape 21st century Romsey. Will it be the community of the past, communities of today, or simply a service area for young people passing through Cambridge, with a few families clinging on while others are forced to live even further from the town centre?

Allan Bringham, November 2006

