

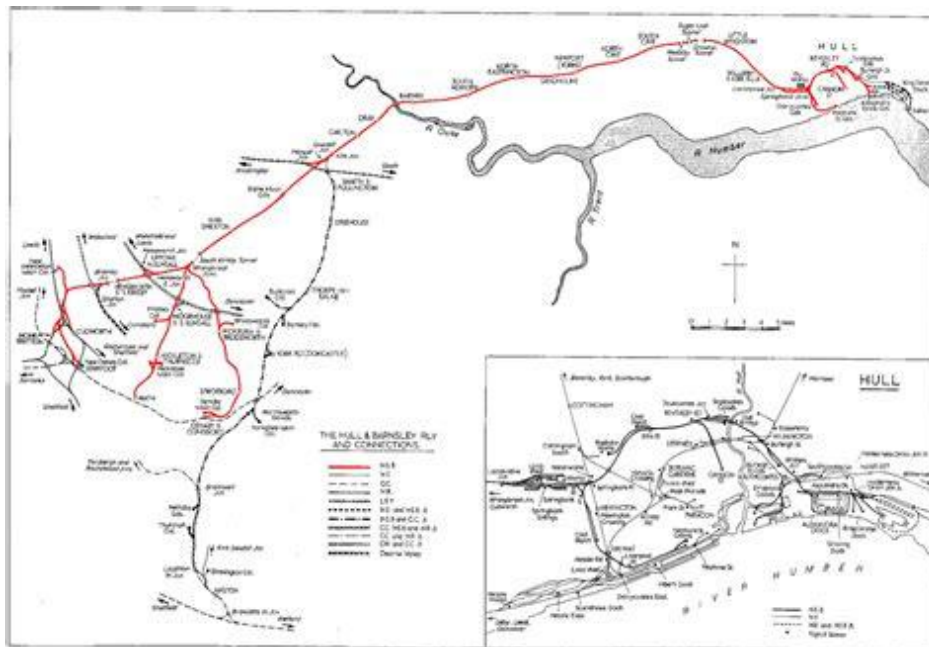
## Nancie Swan (née Powell)

### Her Parents

Nancie Ruth Powell was born on 8 June 1924 in Mandalay, Burma.

Her mother Kathleen Kendal, (b. 1903), had lived in Burma since the age of five when her father, William Kendall, a railway manager who had originally worked for the Hull & Barnsley Railway, had taken an impulsive decision to work for Burma Railways. Why did he take such a drastic step? The reason is lost. The Hull & Barnsley had been burdened with debt since opening in 1885. Not long before he took his decision to leave the H&B, a boiler had exploded on a locomotive and the driver had died of his injuries. A court of enquiry said the boiler had been repaired too many times instead of being replaced. They were careful to say it was no one's fault, despite the fact that people had warned of the danger. It was no more than a mistake of judgement.

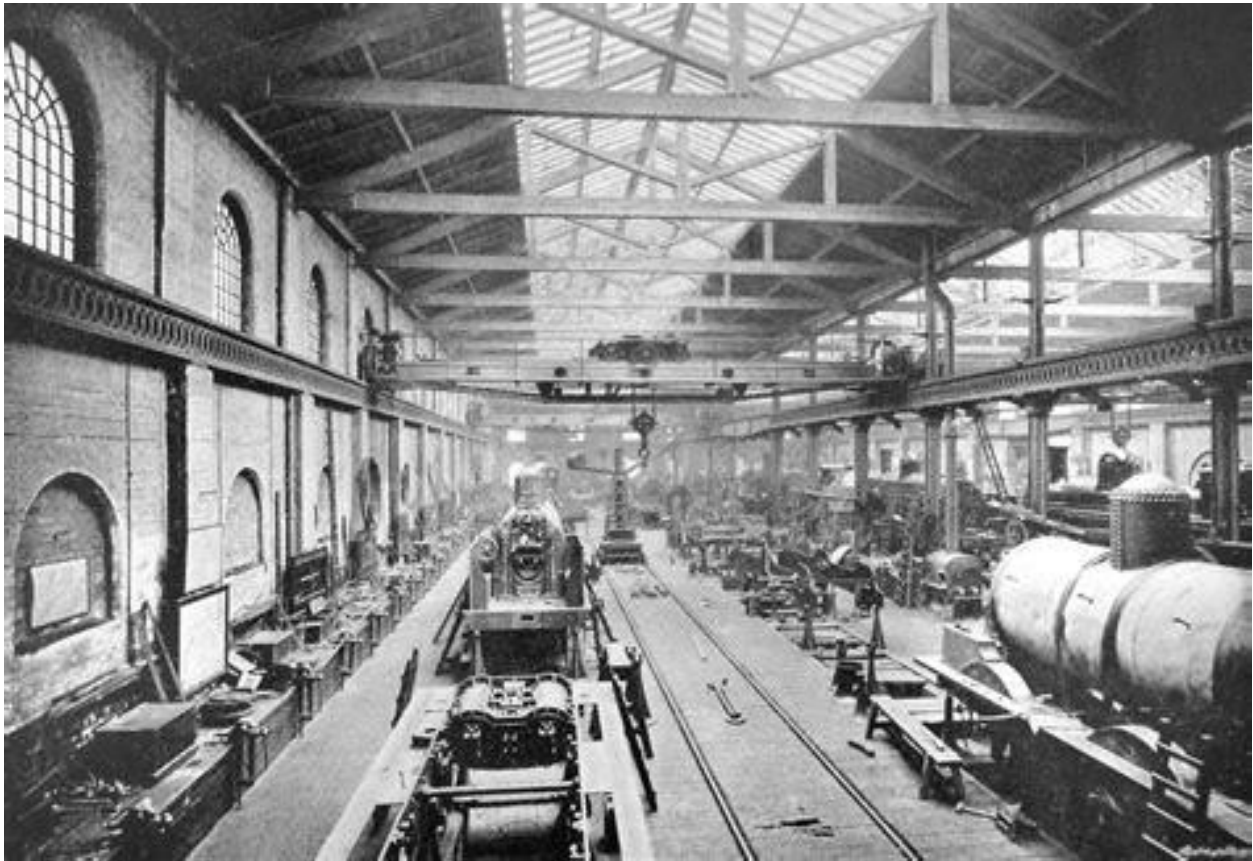
William Kendall was an accountant – referred to in those days as an agent. Had he refused the money to replace the boiler and did he feel the burden of blame, even though none had been attributed? Was he a man of principle who left because his warnings of danger to the Board of Directors had been ignored? Had he had enough of working for a company where money was so tight that everything had to be done on a shoestring? Was he simply ambitious? Anyone who could answer is long-since dead, so the answer will never be known for certain though Nancie has a vague recollection that the motivation for the move was no more than a wish for more money.



[The Hull and Barnsley Railway Company]

Nancie's father, Val (b.1892), was a railway engineer, working for Burma Railways in varied operational jobs, sometimes being responsible for looking after the condition of permanent way and sometimes in charge of projects to design and manufacture new rolling stock.

He had been a dayboy at Harrow School. On leaving, at his father's insistence, he had started work at a bank. They had agreed that if after two years he did not want to continue, he could train as an engineer. Two years later, he was indentured as an apprentice railway engineer at the locomotive works in Crewe. After qualifying, he had a choice of jobs working either for Tanganyika Railways or Burma Railways. He chose the latter.

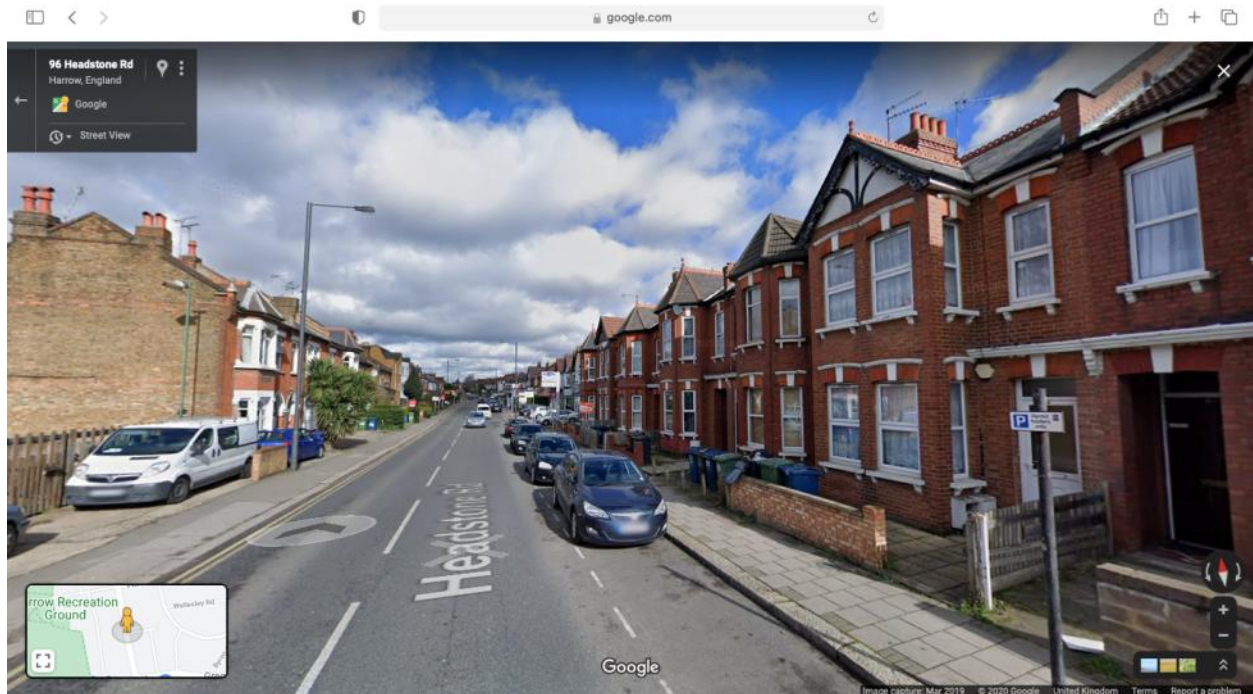


[The Crewe Locomotive Works]

The family pronounced 'Powell' to rhyme with 'Nöel', an understandable wish given its Welsh roots, but one that condemned them to a lifetime of correcting people who assumed it rhymed with 'power'.

## Nancie's Time in England

Nancie came to England for the first time briefly in 1926, aged nearly two. Val's father had died in that year and her parents came home on leave to help her grandmother and her aunt Monica (b.1905) into modest rented accommodation in Headstone Road, Harrow. There was little spare money in Val's family, even though his father had been a director of Smithfield. His uncle had run up large gambling debts and died, leaving his father to bring up two families.



[Headstone Road, Harrow]

Nancie next returned to England in February 1931 aged six when her parents, Kathleen and Val Powell, had six months home leave. There was heavy snow and she was resentful of the fact that whenever she went out, instead of wearing a sun suit, she had to put on a coat, gaiters, gloves and a hat.

At the end of the leave, her parents took her by car to a boarding school at Woodlands, in Little Missenden, just outside High Wycombe where they left her before returning by ship to Burma. It was the first of many lengthy separations.



[Woodlands]

She spent two years at Woodlands but in 1933, when she was nearly nine, she was very ill with measles and a streptococcal infection of the heart.

Some friends from Brentwood with whom Nancie had spent Christmas, wrote to her parents saying that the school had withheld knowledge of her true condition.

Val and Kathleen already had doubts about the suitability of the school because of its strong links with the Roman Catholic Church, a faith they did not share. The letter prompted action, and Kathleen booked a passage home with the intention of finding Nancie a new school. While this process was going on, she was taken out of Woodlands and sent to live with her maternal grandparents in Hull.

Nancie had three siblings; Daphne (b.1927), Dennis (b.1931) and Lyn (b.1945).

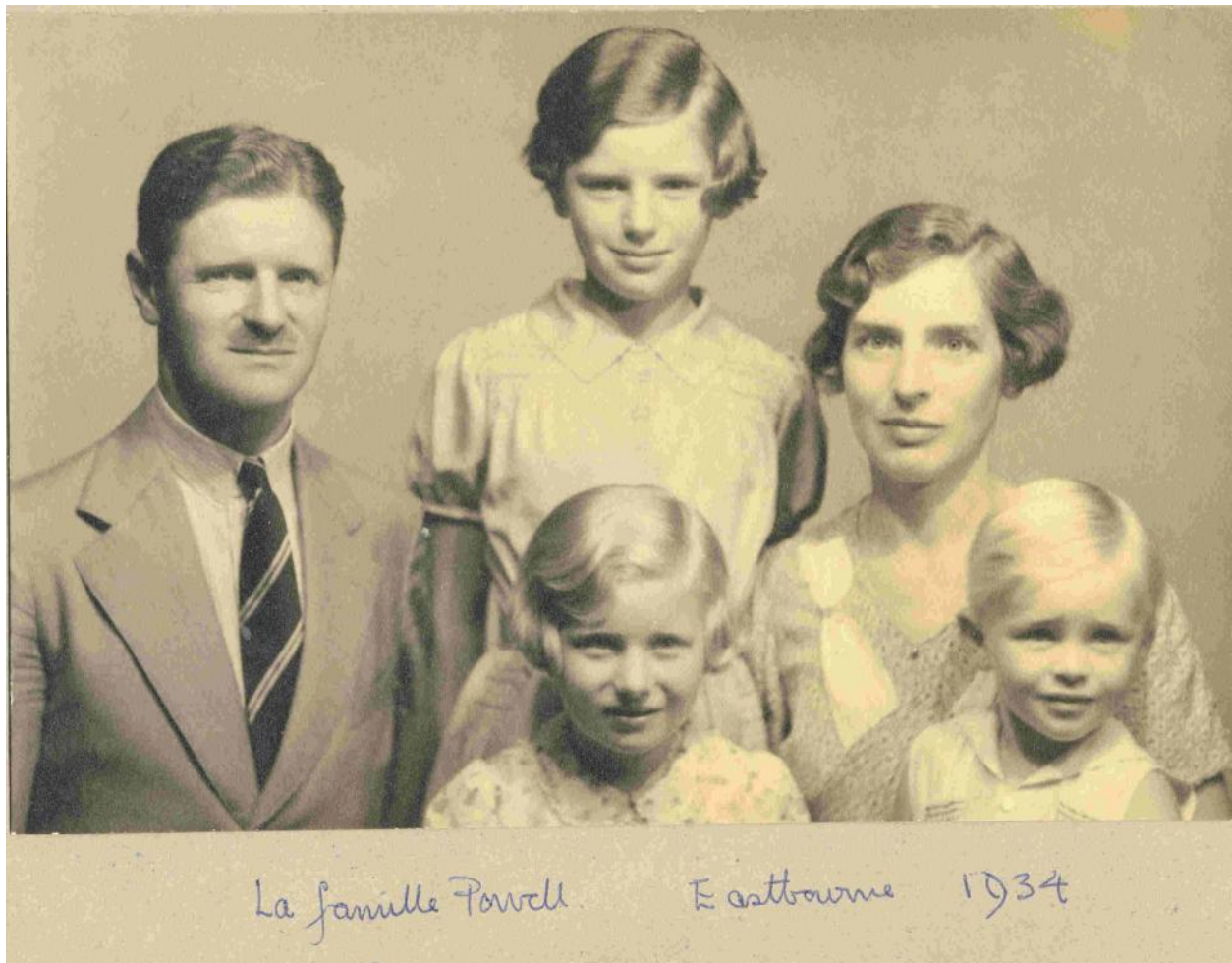
In the summer term of 1933, Nancie and Daphne joined a home school called Uplands at Heathfield in Sussex which took children from the age of three to twelve. A 'home school' was a school that children could go to during the holidays, even after they had left to go to their secondary schools.

There were twenty pupils in the school, educated in two rooms; the junior children in the 'playroom' and the remainder in the 'school room'. During the holidays some of the

children went home but their number was more than made up by an influx of older children returning from other schools for the holidays.

Nancie enjoyed Uplands. It was run by a retired Major James Clark and his wife Mary, known as Uncle Jim and Aunt Mary. For the first year after she arrived she was not allowed to run or play games because of her heart condition, but as compensation she was allowed to go out to the in the horse and trap with the handyman who was known simply as Burnett.

In Spring 1934, Kathleen, Val and Dennis came back to England on leave and rented Upperton Farmhouse in Eastbourne.



One of Val's rituals on home leave was to sell his car in Burma and replace it with a new one which he would ship out from England. On this occasion, he collected his new Armstrong Siddeley from the works in Coventry. According to the sales brochures, Armstrong Siddeleys were noted for their quality, reliability and sobriety and were apparently much favoured by bank managers, the clergy and solicitors. The Autocar for September 28, 1934 said confidently, "the size of the engine [17hp, 2.3 litres, 6

cylinders] will make the chassis suitable for colonial work too, especially as the standard performance ... is definitely higher than hitherto." Top speed was 68 mph.



[Armstrong Siddeley]

At the end of the leave, Nancie and Daphne were left at Uplands. They would next see their parents four years later in 1938.

In Summer 1936 Nancie left Uplands and went to school at Kent College, Folkestone. It was a much larger school with about 100 pupils and she made the move without help from her parents.

She returned to Uplands for the school holidays where she was treated with affection and given the freedom to explore the countryside on her bicycle. She would go as far as Eastbourne where she discovered the restaurant at Boots which offered the contrasting delights of toad-in-the hole and a palm court orchestra. Sometimes she would be asked to run errands, for example to collect prescriptions from the doctor. She was particularly fond of roller-skating which she used to do in the church hall. In the evenings they would sometimes watch cartoons of Felix the Cat.

Christmas at Uplands followed a standard pattern. Aunt Mary, who had lived in Switzerland, insisted that the tree be decorated with real candles which were lit by Burnett, using a taper attached to a long pole.

On Christmas morning, the children awoke to find stockings that she had filled. Usually there was an apple in one end and a tangerine at the other. In the middle would be small presents such as a torch, a little plastic hooter that unrolled as you blew it, or gold-wrapped chocolate coins.

Later in the morning the children would be allowed to open three presents; one from their parents; one that was obviously a book; and one that was obviously a game.

After going to church at Burwash, they would have a traditional Christmas lunch before lying down to read on rugs spread out on the floor. In the afternoon there would be a walk followed by Christmas tea. Their remaining presents were opened on Boxing Day. By controlling the rate at which the children could open their presents, it was hoped to prevent them from becoming overexcited.



[Burwash Church]

In Spring of 1938, Kathleen and Val returned to the UK for six months home leave and rented a bungalow at Fairlight in Hastings. Although it was nearly four years since Nancie had seen them, she felt no feeling of alienation, largely because every week that

they had been apart, she had received a letter from her mother. That communication, slender as it might seem, was strong enough to bind the family unit together.

Following his normal pattern, Val bought a new car, this time a Ford V8. As an engineer he was greatly attracted to the car by the number of its cylinders and their V formation. The car was always referred to as 'the V8'. In due course it was to be left behind in Burma for the Japanese.



[Ford V8]



## Escaping the War in Europe

In 1939 Kent College was evacuated from Folkestone to its present location in Pembury.

A year later Nancie was pulled out of a school certificate exam and asked to go to the headmistress at once. Why it was necessary to act so melodramatically in an age where matters were attended to by correspondence over periods of days and weeks was never explained. It might simply have been that the headmistress wanted to give immediate vent to her anger at learning that Val and Kathleen wanted Nancie and Daphne to join them in Burma for the duration of the war. She made no secret that she thought it a supremely bad idea and that it would be far better for Nancie to stay on in England and complete her matriculation. Nancie however was thrilled at the news and felt excited at the prospect of going back to Burma. She returned to the exam hall and then, in a break, went with Daphne to Tunbridge Wells to have their passport photographs taken.

At the end of the summer term, Nancie and Daphne were met by their aunt Monica who put them on the train to Exeter where Dennis was staying at St Luke's College - the school to which Uplands had been evacuated. They knew they would be sailing on the Stratheden, a P&O ship which had only recently come into service at the end of 1937. She was 665 feet long and before she was converted to a troop ship, offered accommodation for 530 first class and 450 tourist class passengers. What they did not know is when they would be sailing or where they would sail from. It was therefore important that the three of them be together so that they could move as a family the moment they received their joining instructions.

At short notice, the children were told to catch a train back up to London where they were met again by their aunt Monica and taken to the Cumberland Hotel near Marble Arch. The following morning, they and four hundred other unaccompanied children reported to Euston to catch the boat train not knowing its destination which was still secret. Their luggage was labeled simply 'SS Stratheden'.



[SS Stratheden]

The train turned out to be going to Liverpool Lyme Street. On arrival, they embarked immediately and found their way to their cabin which was on the inside of the ship just above the water line. Soon afterwards, the ship moved from the quayside to a mooring on the river where the convoy assembled. The only other ship that Nancie can recall by name was the MV Batory, a Polish ship 525 feet long. MV Batory was to become known as a lucky ship because she survived the war, despite exposure to danger. A Wikipedia entry states that between June and July 1940, she was involved transferring £40m of Britain's gold reserves to Montreal and that between August and September she transported seven hundred British children to Australia. The fact that she was in the convoy suggests that Nancie and her siblings started their journey back to Burma in August 1940.



[MV Batory]

Although it might be expected that the children would be frightened by the thought of being sunk by U boats, Nancie said they were comforted by the fact that they were at the centre of the convoy and felt well protected by the destroyers that accompanied them. They even found the sound of depth charges being set off to be reassuring. Had she known that at that period of the war, the Admiralty cyphers were easily broken by the Germans who knew exactly where convoys were routed, and had she known that U Boats could trail convoys by day and then make their way through the central columns on the surface at night, choosing their victims at will, she would not have been so sanguine.

The convoy stopped at Sierra Leone and Cape Town to refuel. At Cape Town their ship anchored in a bay and they had a few days ashore.

When they arrived in Mumbai (Bombay) they were met by friends who gave them lunch and supper before putting them on the night train to Calcutta. It was a thirty-six-hour trip and to Nancie's consternation no soap had been put in her bedding roll. When they

eventually arrived in Calcutta, she was delighted to have the chance to wash at the Great Eastern Hotel. It is extraordinary how a minor discomfort could lodge more strongly in her memory than the peril of the voyage.

The following morning, they arose before dawn and taken to the river Hooghly to board the Short 'Empire' class flying boat to Rangoon. The flying boat (VH-ABE) was called the Coorong and was operated by Qantas. She had been damaged in a storm in Darwin on 12 December 1938 but had subsequently been repaired.



[The 'Cooron', operated by Qantas]

They alighted at Akyab (Myanmar) for a short stop and were taken ashore in a launch to the Imperial Airways clubhouse. Nancie was much impressed that they were offered free fresh lime drinks, though given the price of flying boat tickets the drinks were not as free as they seemed.

When they finally alighted at Rangoon River they were met by their parents. The plan had been to go to their friends the Lusks for dinner and then for the whole family to

catch the night train to Myitnge (Mingee). Unfortunately, Dennis had measles, so he and Kathleen had to stay behind in Rangoon and follow on later.

The journey from Exeter to Rangoon had taken forty-eight days and must have placed a great burden of responsibility on Nancie because the day after she arrived, she collapsed with exhaustion.

## Life in Burma and the flight from the Japanese

The next eighteen months in Burma were idyllic. Mr Singham, a southern Indian taught her Burmese and her mother taught her dress-making and baking. She also read books on architecture, a subject that had begun to interest her. She even had thoughts of applying to read architecture at Rangoon university until she found out that they had no faculty of architecture. There was no food rationing and she could walk out in the countryside along the canal banks, looking at the birds. Her reference book 'The Birds of Burma' is still in the family.



[Swimming Pool at Myitgne circa 1941]



The swimming pool at Myitgne .  
L-R Daphne, Nancie, KP, Dennis



Deep in the background, there was an underlying unease about the Japanese. Even before the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, they were thought to be up to something. Japanese citizens in Burma tended to run the photographic and barber shops. With a logic that could come straight from Warrington-on-Sea, it was feared

this would give them access both to photographs of the Burmese landscape (which could be of military value) and to the latest gossip from loose-tongued officials. Whatever the truth, it was believed that the Japanese were making preparations to invade.



The first Japanese attacks on Burma started in January 1942 but after the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, people became deeply unsettled. Some people had taken an early decision to leave Burma and were able to take most of their possessions with them. Others did not want to be seen to be cowards by running away. The army said it would hold the Japanese, but few believed them, remembering the disgrace of Singapore.

Slowly Nancie was dragged back into the war. Her family built a protective trench under a Tamarind tree which they thought would hide if from the air. She also recalls taking out tea and lime juice to some American pilots who had landed in Hurricanes. Her recollection about the Hurricanes is almost certainly incorrect as there is no record of any US squadron operating Hurricanes. However, the American Volunteer Group (the Flying Tigers) flew in defence of Rangoon and carried out sweeps in P-40s with RAF pilots flying beside them in Hurricanes. It might be possible that Nancie remembered only the more familiar British aircraft.

On 1 March 1942 Kathleen broke the news to the children that they would be leaving Burma for India but on 4 March Val told them that the plans had changed, and they

would be staying. Eventually on 18 March, Kathleen and the children left to board the evacuation train for Shwebo, some fifty miles from Mandalay, to catch an aeroplane to Calcutta. The journey took six hours. Val stayed behind to take his luck.

The evacuation centre at Shwebo was set up in the police barracks. As families arrived they reported to an office where their names were put on a passenger list for the flights out. They were then boarded on outgoing aircraft strictly in the order that they had arrived. In the interim, the families staked a claim to a patch of floor in the barracks where they could make their sleeping arrangements and guard their possessions.

The story as told by some member of the family is that the Powell family spent three nights at the centre before discovering that their names had not been put on the passenger list. That seems highly unlikely, given the importance of the list. Kathleen herself makes no mention of it.

Fortunately, on the fourth day an Airspeed Envoy arrived, and its pilot said he had places for a family of three. Kathleen said they were four but two were small. The pilot agreed to take them.

Kathleen, Nancie and Daphne had a seat each, but Dennis had to sit in a well on a cushion. Nancie's recollection of the aircraft was that it was very small, and she seemed surprised some seventy years later to see from a photograph how large it was. Perhaps her recollection was distorted by the fact that the Air India Airspeed Envoy she flew in was configured to take only three passengers instead of the normal six.





At Chittagong they were taken to the club where they were given a bath and then lunch. In a letter to her aunt Monica, Nancie wrote that "They didn't really like to send the little plane [Envoy] over because they weren't sure it could cross the Yomas." That remark (written at the time, so likely to have been quoted accurately) has always been accepted by the family as meaning that the Envoy was flying at or above its nominal ceiling height to clear the Yoma Mountains. However, that explanation is almost certainly wrong. In Flight magazine (July 12, 1934) the Airspeed 'Envoy' is described as having an operating ceiling height of 17,000 feet. As the height of the Yoma mountains is about 10,000 feet at the highest point, it would not have had any difficulty whatever clearing the mountains, even if fully loaded. A far more likely explanation of the remark is that the Envoy was operating near the limit of its range. A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows it would have been running on fumes by the time it reached Chittagong.

The story of the Powell family's evacuation from Burma is told in detail in both in 'The Country Within' (published by Birlinn 2020) and in 'The Peacocks and the Swans', a privately published account. The bare facts are that after leaving the club at Chittagong, they were put on the night mail train for Calcutta. As the train was pulling out of the station, Kathleen for the only time in her life, pulled the communication chord because the porter bringing their precious suitcase which contained their only possessions in the world, had failed to find their carriage.

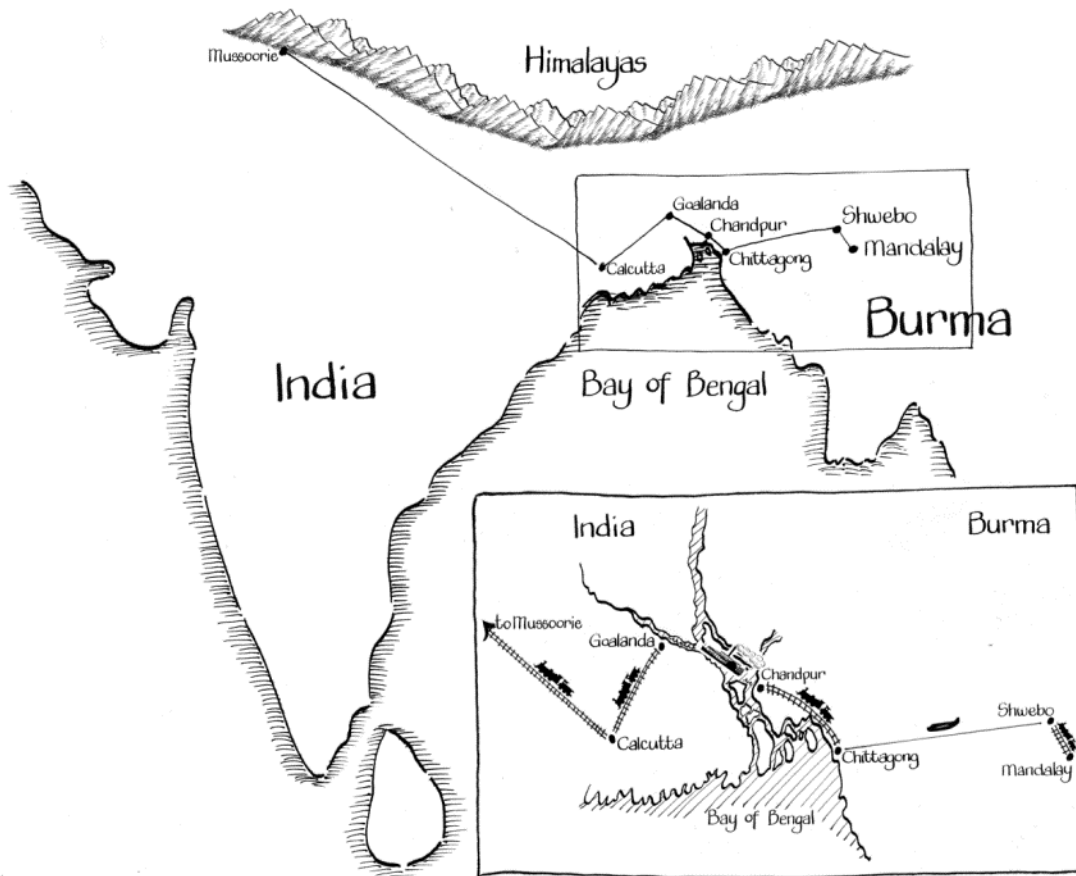
At Chandpur, they were woken at four in the morning and transferred to a river steamer which took them up the Brahmaputra. They came ashore eight hours later at Goalundo where they scrambled up the river bank in the middle of a sandstorm to catch the train that took them on the last leg of the journey to Calcutta.

They eventually arrived at Howrah station (the main station in Calcutta) at ten o'clock at night and were taken to the Loreto Convent. It had been a long day and they had had no food since leaving the ferry.

The WVS welcome brigade assigned them to a dormitory on an upper floor where they went to wash and brush up. Dinner was served in the basement but by the time they arrived there was only one sausage left and no water. The sausage was given to Daphne. Hungry and thirsty, they went to bed.

The following morning the WVS told them there were some people in Calcutta willing to take in refugees and the family was split between two houses.

Three days later, they took the train to Mussoorie where Kathleen had taken two hotel rooms for a month. Then Dennis and Kathleen both came down with Chicken Pox.



[The flight from Burma]

They were made to leave the hotel because some people from Bombay had made a prior booking for the period of the hot weather and moved to an isolation hospital at the other end of town.

Then Nancie fell ill with amoebic dysentery, a condition which she said later was more painful than childbirth. The diagnosis was made by an Indian doctor who had the novelty of treating his first ever European patient.

Out of the blue, a call was received from an Anglo-Indian postmistress asking if there was a Mrs Powell at the hospital. As soon as the receiver was passed to Kathleen she heard the words "Hello Kitty!". Val had managed to escape from Burma and had tracked down the family with the postmistress's help. Very shortly afterwards he joined them so the whole family was reunited.

Val had stayed in Burma to keep the railways running for as long as possible before the Japanese arrived, and had then taken the train north to the end of the line at Myi Tky Ina ('near big river'). By chance, a China National Airways Corporation aircraft had landed to refuel en route to Calcutta and he paid a huge sum of money for a seat. It bought him his life, so he never complained about the cost. Val's brother-in-law Cyril

Kendall was less fortunate and died of cerebral malaria shortly after successfully making his escape through the jungle. Following his death, his widow Dulcie and their baby son Colin came home on the SS Cairo which was sunk by a U boat in the South Atlantic. After two weeks in an open lifeboat, they were rescued by fishermen from St Helena. Their account is told in a book "Goodnight! Sorry for sinking you!", the words spoken to them through a megaphone by the gallant U boat captain.



The family had to leave the hospital and looked for Indians willing to let rooms. They found a 'dreadful place' and moved in but eventually found a boarding house where they stayed until the end of September 1942.

While staying in Mussoorie, Nancie had broken her arm while roller-skating and had been carried along the ridge in a Dandy – a kind of sedan chair - to the doctor who had set it under x-ray. The arm had not yet mended when at the beginning of 1942 they moved to Dehra Dun which was the cantonment camp and regimental headquarters for the army.



[www.alamy.com](http://www.alamy.com) - ERGMA3

They stayed in a boarding house run by two Anglo-Indian women. Nancie learned shorthand and typing which was thought to be good physiotherapy for her broken arm.

Val was then sent to Calcutta where he went with Kathleen and Nancie to live at 5 Store Road. Daphne and Denis were sent to school in Simla.

In early 1943, Nancie joined the Chinese Intelligence Wing. She was not in the army, so although she wore khaki uniform, it had no badges. Her job was to keep up to date the card indexes on people under surveillance.

She cycled to and from work and would change into her civilian clothes when she returned home, usually at about four o'clock. Several times a week she would cycle to the race course where there would be tea dances for the troops.

A year later in early 1944, Val was posted to Simla and Nancie went too. She joined the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) ("WACI") – pronounced 'whack-eye' - as a Lance Corporal in GHQ. She subsequently was sent to the Officer Cadet Training Unit ("OCTU") and became a second subaltern in Meerut.

After VE day she was posted as a Junior Commander to a unit in Delhi which was stationed near the Viceroy's Lodge. In both positions she had an administrative role in charge of pay and rations and managed a team of young women.

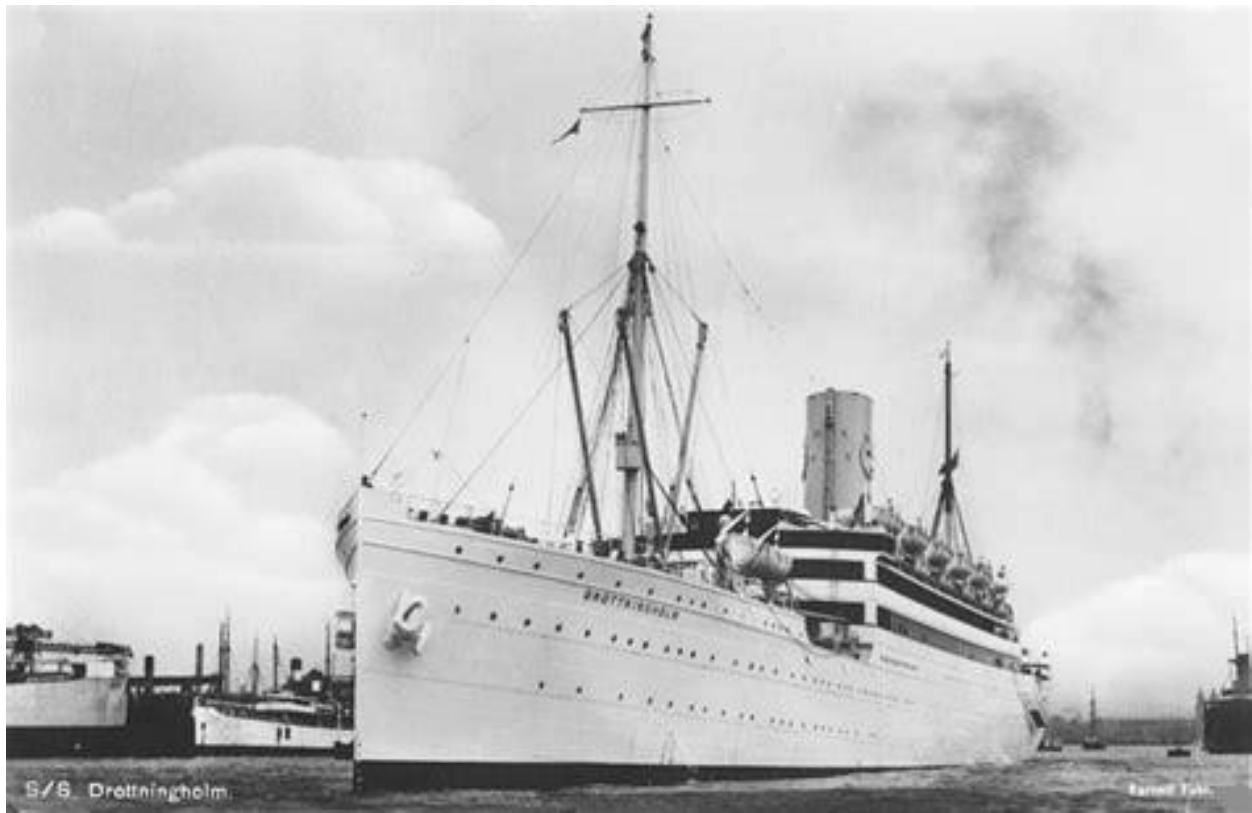


While in Delhi, she received a telegram to say that Lyn had been born on 10 November 1945.



[  
Post War Burma

Nancie stayed in Delhi until after the end of the war when Kathleen was able to obtain a passage home for the family, Val having left on an earlier ship. They sailed on the S.S. Drottningholm a ship from the Swedish American line which was designed for the North Atlantic, but which had been used extensively for repatriation mercy missions. During the first part of the trip, the ship was unbearably hot and the food which consisted largely of dumplings and sausages was overwhelmingly substantial. The family had a cabin for four with two sets of bunks. Lyn slept in a carrycot which was placed on the floor on top of a cabin trunk.



[the S.S. Drottningholm]

As they approached the Red Sea, the weather changed for the worse and they faced a strong cold wind from the North. The smoke from the funnels of the ships steaming south was blowing over their bows.

While they were going through the Suez Canal, the bows of the ship were blown downwind, grounding on one bank while her stern went aground on the other. It took tugs a day and a half to pull her free and unblock the canal.

While Kathleen and the family were returning, Val had found a hotel in Hawkhurst which agreed to take them as long-term guests on special terms.

At this time, Nancie was engaged to be married to a man she had first met in India when he was in charge of keeping order amongst evacuees. He had been a printer with the Baptist Missionary Press but was uncertain what he would do now that the war was over. Nancie visited his mother who lived somewhere between Derby and Nottingham and was gathering everything ready to go back to India to join him, when she decided to call the engagement off – a decision she had to communicate by letter. Curiously, she has no recollection of where she posted the letter. Had he meant even a small amount to her, one might have expected the image of the letter box to be seared onto her memory, but she remembers nothing of it. She said he was dull.

In August or September 1946 Val moved back to Burma, and the rest of the family moved out of the main hotel to rooms over the stable where the rooms were smaller and cheaper.

The winter of 1947 was hard and the first of many large drifts of snow arrived on 21 January. Daphne was at Art College and Dennis at school at Felsted. Nancie was considering applying to university but had not made much progress, if any. When her mother Kathleen secured a passage for two adults to Burma and suggested she accompany her, she accepted readily.

They left in February on a Paddy Henderson Line ship that sailed from Glasgow. The journey from Euston took 36 hours as the train struggled through snow drifts. At one point when they were stuck, a signalman put boiling water into a Thermos for Lyn's dried milk.

At half-past one in the morning, they finally arrived at Glasgow Central station. On the coach to the boat, Nancie met Lavender Maclachlan who was to become a lifelong friend. It was one of those chance events which at the time are without significance, but which shape a lifetime.

Lavender had married Bill in Calcutta during the war. She had been staying with her mother-in-law in Edinburgh and was now returning to Burma with her baby, Mike. Her mother-in-law, not understanding that Nancie and Lyn were sisters, pointed at Nancie and suggested that she might be a good travelling companion because she too had a baby.

Yet again, the ship that Nancie was on was involved in a serious incident, this time catching its bows on the quayside while going astern and turning into the Clyde.

The night passage through the Irish Sea was rough. In the morning, to Kathleen's surprise the sun was on the starboard side. The ship had altered course and was making for Milford Haven to put in for repairs to the damaged bow. A month later, they continued their voyage, stopping to take on coal at Gibraltar and Port Said.

When eventually they disembarked at Rangoon, Kathleen and Nancie went to live at Ahlone Road. Nancie discovered that Lavender lived nearby at Britannic Court and it was there that she first met Norman, covered in mud after a game of rugby. At the time he was still married but proceedings had begun for the marriage to be annulled.

Norman's marriage to a woman called Eva MacLean was a classic failure of one arranged against the running clock of a home leave. They had been friends at Cambridge and had maintained contact throughout the war. The ceremony had taken place shortly after Norman had arrived back in the UK, but sadly it became clear that in the euphemism of the day Eva 'didn't like men'. The marriage was never consummated, and she never remarried. Norman said she was an attractive and highly intelligent person. She went on to become headmistress of St Margaret's School for girls and is credited in lifting its academic standards. She is buried alongside her brother on the island of Tiree.



[Norman]

Burma became independent on 4 January 1948. Val was told he was no longer required by the Burma Railways and was forced to retire. Val's sister Monica suggested Lymington would be a suitable place to live with its warm climate and proximity to the



sea. She had worked as a governess to the daughter of Admiral Greatorex and knew the town well. They rented a house (Highfield Hut) while they looked for somewhere to buy. They found a house for sale in Woodside and bought it outright for £5,000. It was subsequently called 'Chinthays', after the Burmese lions.



[Kathleen at Chinthays in 1989]

Nancie did not go back to England with her family but stayed on in Burma living in digs with a railway family called the Proctors. She worked first for the Burma Railways and then for the Trade Commissioner. After independence she worked for the Commercial Counsellor.

Her reason for staying on was that she and Norman had already agreed to marry, though they could not tell anyone because the annulment of Norman's marriage to Eva MacLean had yet to go through.

Norman and Nancie married on 4th December 1948 in the Scots Kirk, Rangoon. Neither set of parents was present, and Norman's parents had never met Nancie.



They came home on the Bibby Line in March 1949. Nancie was pregnant with Alasdair who was born on 19 November. Just before the birth, Norman was posted to Digboi in Assam and missed Alasdair's baptism in the Muckle Kirk, Peterhead, conducted by his grandfather Hugh Douglas Swan.

## Assam, India

In 1950, Nancie went out by ship with Alasdair to Rangoon where Norman had engaged a Korean nanny called May May. After a couple of days in Rangoon, the four of them flew up to Digboi in Assam where they lived in Bungalow 21 until it was destroyed in an earthquake on 16 August 1950.

The earthquake struck at lunchtime. Nancie and Norman were rehearsing on the veranda for a production of "See How They Run" which Norman was producing. At first, they thought the Chinese were invading but when they realised what was happening, they moved quickly to the tennis court. The ground was shaking so vigorously that they could not stand up and the chimney stack collapsed into the dining room, making the house uninhabitable. They moved to Bungalow 91.

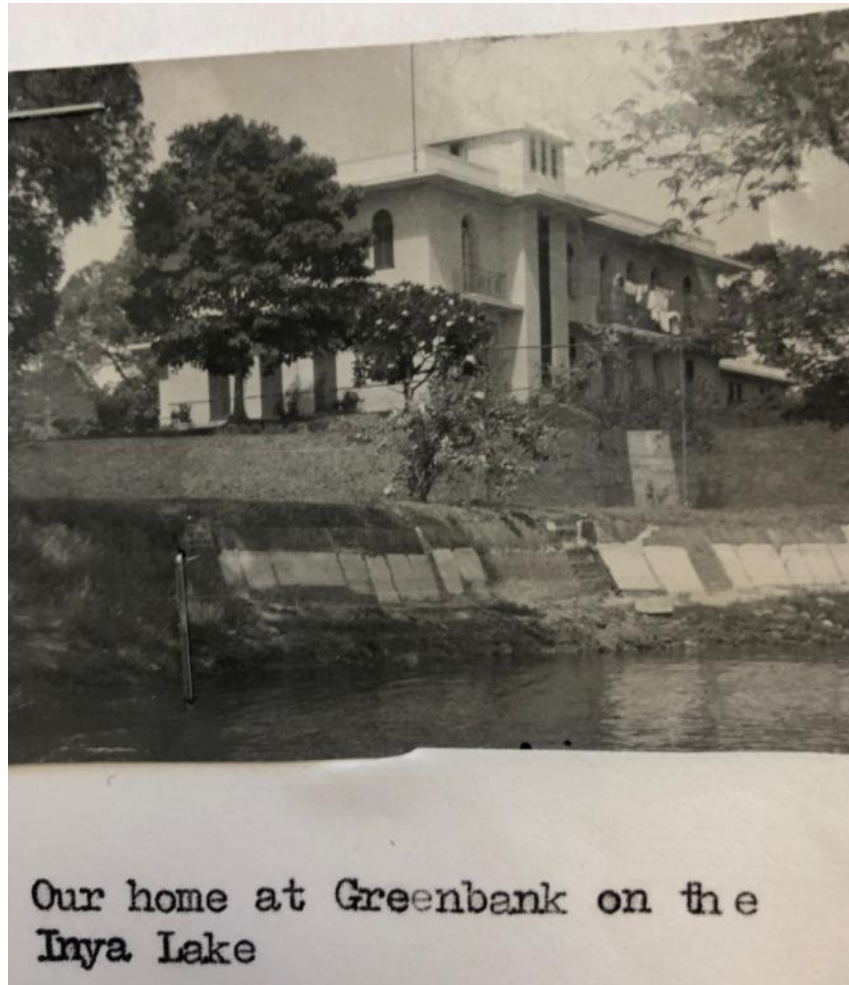
In March 1951, they moved bungalow again and in October 1951 Debbie was born. She was baptised by the Scots Kirk minister in the garden which looked like a natural cathedral with the closely planted teak trees.



[A typical Digboi bungalow]

In 1952, Nancie and Norman went home on leave by ship for eight months. They stayed with Val and Kathleen in 'Chinthays' in Woodside Road in Lymington and bought a caravan which they parked in front of the garage and used as a bedroom. Later they went up to Balerno, outside Edinburgh, to see Norman's parents and stayed in a hotel nearby.

At the end of 1952, they all sailed back to Rangoon, spending Christmas and New Year on board ship. They lived at Greenbank beside the lake and Nancie started a kindergarten. In September 1953 Neil was born.



During the period at Greenbank there was much social contact with the Burmese army. Ne Win, who was later to become the strong-man General who ran Myanmar, used to come and play tennis.

In early 1955, Norman was transferred to Chittagong. The whole family came home by ship and lived in 15 Landsdown Crescent, Edinburgh which was the first house Nancie and Norman ever owned. Norman then returned to Dacca in what was then East Pakistan.

In 1959, after putting all the children into school for the summer term – Alasdair to East Acre in Winchester and Debbie and Neil to the Grange Home School in Edinburgh - Nancie and Norman flew to Chittagong by way of Rome, Venice, Greece and Palestine.

They had been in Chittagong for six weeks when they received a letter from the headmistress of Grange Home School, saying Debbie had a puffy face. The doctor said she should go to the Sick Children's Hospital. They were assured there was nothing to worry about.

Alasdair and Neil stayed at Grange Home School over the summer holidays and went for their summer holidays to St Abbs Haven Hotel where before every meal everyone would sing 'Let us with a gladsome mind, Praise the Lord for he is kind'.

Master Neil Swan

THE GRANGE HOME SCHOOL  
GRANGE LOAN  
EDINBURGH. 9

SESSION 19 60-61 TERM I

	£	s.	d.
Boarding and Laundry	52	10	0
Holiday Boarding (Home)	:	:	:
Holiday Boarding (Seaside)	:	:	:
Incidental Expenses (Term III)	3	4	8
Education	18	18	0
Pianoforte	:	:	:
Percussion Band	-	7	6
Ballet	:	:	:
Dancing	:	:	:
Stationery and Books (Term III)	-	6	-
Sewing Materials, Handwork	-	1	-
Use of Apparatus	-	2	6
Daily Boarder	:	:	:
Dinners	:	:	:
Games	:	:	:
Tennis	:	:	:
Insurance Premium	2	8	0
Operation Expenses Insurance <i>Relocate (Spring)</i>	4	3	5
	£ 70	14	3

RECEIVED PAYMENT  
WITH THANKS

THE GRANGE HOME SCHOOL

It is understood that for 14 days Notice or a Term's Fees be  
given before the removal of a Boarder or a Day Scholar.

FEES are payable at the commencement of each Term.  
Cheques should be made payable to THE BURSAR.

School re-opens on 27/9/60  
Term ends 16/12/60

Nancie and Norman consulted Oliver Brears, a surgeon at the hospital as Sirium near Rangoon, about how they should best respond to the news of Debbie's health. His advice was unequivocal. Nancie should go back to Edinburgh.

Nancie came home in September 1959. Debbie was transferred to the kidney unit at the Royal Infirmary where they did tests. The consultant in charge of her treatment took her file with him on a trip to Boston, Massachusetts which at the time was the world centre of expertise for kidney transplants.

It transpired that Debbie had a kidney lupus. There was no cure and they were told she would not live long. Norman was still in Chittagong and Nancie was only able to discuss Debbie's progress by letter or in three-minute phone calls arranged in advance. In the evenings, Nancie would try to distract herself from her grief by playing the grand piano in the sitting room.

Debbie died on 31 August 1960. Norman had returned from East Pakistan just two and a half days earlier. When the ambulance men came to take Debbie to hospital, Alasdair and Neil were watching a drama on forest fires in California on television which involved the thrilling use of helicopters or 'whirlybirds.' The last words that they heard their sister say were "Oh no!" when she was told why the ambulance had come.

At the moment of Debbie's death, Nancie and Norman were told to leave her. By today's standards it was a cruel act, but the nurses did not mean to be unkind. It has always tormented Nancie that she was not with her precious daughter at the moment she needed her most.

The following morning Norman went to arrange her funeral with an undertaker across the road from the hospital. Out of all the undertakers in the country, it was his ill fortune to choose one – probably the only one - who lacked any sense of compassion. Norman reflected bitterly that he might have been arranging for the disposal of an animal carcass.

Debbie's funeral service was held at the Warriston Crematorium Cloister Chapel.

The Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Wimbush, in an act of great kindness lent Nancie and Norman their cottage in Kilconquhar, Fife to give the family time to come to terms with what had happened. It was at that time that Nancie first started painting with oils and would lose herself with her tears in a field at her easel.

## Pakistan

After Alasdair and Neil had returned to their respective schools, Nancie and Norman flew out to Digboi, stopping off for a much-needed break in Greece and the Holy Land. Three weeks after arriving, they were sent to Karachi so that Norman could replace someone who had said something indiscrete to a Pakistani Government official.

Just before Christmas of 1960 Alasdair and Neil joined them, after travelling on the Comet 4C and experiencing jet flight for the first time. The early Comets had had a catastrophic record but even the latest version had its problems. One of the Comets the boys travelled on (G-APDF) had been badly damaged when a tyre burst at 13,000 ft. after taking off from Beirut on 9 April 1959. The tyre had caused extensive damage to the starboard wing and engine, and an overweight landing had all but destroyed the undercarriage, but they managed to put it back together again. In those days, the perils of flying were more likely to result from a failure of components than a failure of politics. The cockpit of that particular Comet is now used as a flight simulator in Chipping Norton. The rear fuselage and tail were used in the Nimrod project.

In Karachi, the family stayed initially in a modern flat in a compound, but subsequently moved to a more exotic detached house at 33 Clifton which had originally been built to house a harem.



[33 Clifton]

Alasdair returned to Pilgrims for the start of the Easter term, but Neil stayed in Karachi, receiving lessons from Nancie.

At the end of 1961, Norman was sent by the company to Rawalpindi to negotiate the sale to the Pakistani government of the Sui to Multan gas pipeline. Rawalpindi at that time was where the government had been set up by President Ayub Khan to move it away from 'corrupt Karachi'.

The Burmah Oil Company arranged accommodation in the house of General Latif Khan who was a company employee and who was in hospital following a heart attack. Many members of the government would come to the house including Ali Bhutto, later to be hanged.



## Return to Scotland

In July 1962 Nancie and Norman left Pakistan for good and came back to Edinburgh where for two years they rented a basement flat at 37 Heriot Row (nicknamed 'The Mole Hole') while Norman trained to be a minister in the Church of Scotland and Nancie qualified as a Domestic Science teacher at Athol Crescent. The two boys were still at boarding school which meant their study was undisturbed during term time.



[Neil and Nancie first footing outside the Mole Hole]

The first winter was the famously hard one of 1962/63. Alasdair (14) and Neil (10) sledged in Queen Street Gardens from first light to last. It could hardly have been a greater contrast to the heat of Pakistan.

The house was heated by a mixture of paraffin heaters, electric fan heaters and a coal stove. Condensation poured from the windows, but the house stayed warm for as long as the paraffin jerrycans were refilled by Grays of George Street.

In 1965, Norman took up his first (and last) charge as minister of Carriden Kirk, Bo'ness and Nancie taught domestic science at Bo'ness Academy. The contrast with their previous life in the East could not have been greater.



[Carriden Church]

In the East, there were no old people, few young people and no poor people, at least within the expatriate community. Everyone was in the prime of life and rich enough for more money not to make their lives better. The sky was blue, the sun blazed, and the buildings and gardens were full of colour.

Bo'ness was a mining town with a working colliery that provided most of the employment. It also had an iron foundry and a factory that made shirts for Marks & Spencer. The old town had soot blackened buildings and a harbour that had long-since silted up, giving a feeling of decay. Around its centre, council houses had been built in estates. Some were poor quality and were stained with water leaks, but many sat in large well-tended gardens and, though faced with drab brown pebbledash, they provided a comfortable family home. The people who lived there often described it as a dump, though it was a label only they could apply as they were loyal to their community.



Nancie taught at Bo'ness Academy, a Secondary Modern School, now demolished and remembered only in the name 'Academy Road'. She took the job, not only because she and Norman needed her income, but also to show that her support for the state education system. She was acutely aware that Norman might be criticised for not sending Alasdair and Neil to state schools. It was a noble objective but not one that led to job satisfaction. She could never quite accept their values nor they hers.

Life was tough. Not only did she have to prepare and give her lessons, but she had to run the house and carry out all the duties of a minister's wife. During term time, it meant she never had a day off.

A woman's job (and it was a woman's job to run the house) was hard. There were no supermarkets and shops closed in the late afternoon and at lunchtime. Wednesdays and Saturdays were half days. On Sundays, all the shops were closed. The fishmonger, baker and butcher came to the house once a week in their vans but most of the shopping had to be done on a Saturday morning. There was little self-service and at each shop you had to wait in a long queue and know exactly what you wanted when you were eventually served.

The manse was a large, cold late 19th century building. The furnishing was a mixture of styles, nearly everything, including beds and carpets, being bought second or third hand in the Edinburgh auction sales. Harmony was rare and coincidental.

Washing was done in a twin-tub machine that required undivided attention and physical effort every step of the process. Clothes had to be hung on lines before being ironed. A family wash took half a day. The ironing filled in spare moments.

Money was tight and things that broke were often not repaired, sometimes unnecessarily so. The gas cooker was so old that the taps become stiff and the plastic knobs broke, requiring the flames to be regulated using an adjustable spanner. The grill had heat plates that fell down onto the food in the pan and the oven burned meat to a cinder because the thermostat no longer worked.

Nancie rarely had time for herself. Even weekday evenings were interrupted by the need to bake cakes for overfed ministers who came to 'Fraternals' or make tea for baptismal or communicant groups. Saturday evenings were the only time that Nancie had any prospect of relaxing but often she was preparing for the three church services the following day by polishing the communion silver or cutting up Mother's Pride bread into small squares.

As if she had need of further handicaps, she suffered from migraine headaches which afflicted her at least once a week. They were not minor affairs though she never allowed them to stop her from teaching. Somehow, she would make it through the day before being violently sick and retiring to bed with the curtains closed against the light.

Norman was typical of men of the time and thought that housework and cooking was a dark art that he could never master. Putting water in the milk pan and leaving it to soak was about the extent of his assistance.

In 1975, Nancie applied for the job of Head of Department at Blackburn Academy where she worked under a headmaster she did not respect because of his lack of ambition for the school and the pupils. Inevitably, this limited her job-satisfaction but not her commitment. She continued to teach after she and Norman had moved in to live in 40 Great King Street where they had bought a top flat, Norman having retired early on the grounds of ill-health. For the first time for many years, Nancie had a gas cooker that worked.



[Kitchen at 40 Great King Street with working gas cooker]



[40 Great King Street]

While Norman might have been useless in the home, he was a wise guide. When personal computers were introduced, he told Nancie that they marked the start of a social revolution and that she needed to be able to use one. She started with a BBC

microcomputer and a dot-matrix daisy-wheel printer and has followed every subsequent evolution of the technology. At the age of 95, although registered blind, she is able to send emails on her iPad.



[The BBC Micro Computer]

Norman died in August 1983, days after his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. As is often the case with people who suffer from emphysema, he died of a heart attack. Nancie was widowed at the young age of 59.

Shortly after Norman's death, Nancie dressed up in her finest clothes and took the Orient Express to Venice, returning on Concorde.

For many years she managed the project to conserve the flats in her part of Great King Street – a project that took so many years to complete that when it eventually ended, it was almost necessary to start again.

In her late 60s her driving deteriorated, her response to every pressure being to drive more slowly. Eventually, she reached the point when she became a danger because of the impatience she created in other drivers. Rather than stop driving, she joined the Institute of Advanced Motorists, obtained instruction and was trained to become a good driver, eventually becoming a member of the institute.

In 1994 she was told by her optician that she had dry macular degeneration and would gradually go blind. “Diagnosed and dumped,” was how she felt she was treated. Reluctantly she surrendered her driving licence.

In 2001 she sold her flat in Great King Street and moved to Flat 11 in Falcon House. It was a useful first step in getting rid of possessions, though both houses were over-stuffed with objects. In her view, practicality should always trump aesthetics, though in practice both attributes were crushed by chaos.

Nancie became a champion of the macular society, telling anyone and everyone who would listen – and even those who would not – about how to avoid the affliction and how to help those who had it. In recognition of her service, the Macular Society awarded her a medal.

In September 2019, with perfect timing, given the arrival of Covid 19, she moved into the Chamberlain Care Home in Edinburgh where she adapted well and at the start of 2021 is very happy in her 97<sup>th</sup> year.