

Hawthorn Sketches - Life in the Valley, by Geraldine McFarlane. Chapter One.

Alice Austin

The stretch of road between Camberwell Junction and Burwood Road, Hawthorn is a busy one these days. Cars and industrial traffic pour down it on their way to and from the outer suburbs to the city; it needs three sets of traffic lights to regulate the endless stream. But Camberwell Road, Hawthorn, in the 1990s is quite different from the area where Alice Austin spent her first years early in the century.

She was born in 1909, the fourth child in the Kellow family, at 122 Camberwell Road, Upper Hawthorn, as it was then called. Norman was the eldest, then came Lavinia (Winnie), Hazel, Alice and, then, the younger boys, Colin and George. The house was on the west side of the road, dominated by two large brickworks, Fritsch, Holzer and Company and the City Brickworks Company. Frederick Spears managed the City Brickworks and everyone called it Spear's Brickworks. Mr Kellow worked for Fritsch and Holzer at one time and the family lived in a house owned by the firm, although it was next to Spears' brickyard on the Camberwell Junction side. Between the Kellow's house and Redfern Road were two buildings, a shop and a garage, which belonged to Spear's, a paddock and two small cottages. On the opposite side of Camberwell Road, the Council had its stables and a weighbridge which we used to play on. Mr Prudden was the stablehand there and Mrs Prudden used to look after the weighbridge. I think she used to get threepence a time for the weighbridge. Horses and carts would be driven in and their loads weighed... in those days most people had horses and carts. All the Council used horses, big Clydesdales, and every Friday night, when they came back from work ... they'd go down to the paddocks, one man would take them down. They knew where they were going and they used to go down Roseberry Street - but I don't know where they went from there. And Sunday after-noon, they'd all be coming back clippety-clop up the street, and we'd go out to meet the horses.

It was a safe environment for children and there was always something interesting to do. They could easily cross the road and play on the weighbridge; they ran about in the empty paddock next door and sat there in the spring making daisy chains from the capeweed flowers; they went to the playground in Redfern Road. Even as little children, they took themselves to kindergarten and school, and later on they went to Girl Guides at night, always on foot and unaccompanied.

Their house was not large. The three girls slept in one room and a bungalow was built in the back yard for the boys. Mrs Kellow 'always had some relatives staying from the country, I can remember. I had to sleep in the bath one night because there was no room ... Mum had to make up a bed in the bath.'

But no matter how short of rooms they were, she always made one into a dining room. The piano was kept there and Alice and Winnie learnt music from a Miss Woods, who lived nearby. There was a big back yard. They kept fowls and Mr Kellow had a splendid vegetable garden there, where he grew potatoes and cabbages and everything else the family needed.

It was fun living next to the brickworks. The children watched as clay was being dug on the site in the 'clay holes' and hauled up in wooden buckets. Then it was pressed into bricks and marked with the manufacturer's name. The bricks were loaded on to sideless barrows, which had wooden slats for a base, and were then wheeled to the kilns for baking. Not all sections of the kiln were fired at once: some were baking, some were cooling and some were empty. At the top were little raised-up openings for putting in coal and each was fitted with a cap. These used to get very hot and 'Rowdy', the fireman, used to take them off with a metal hook ('we used to call him Rowdy because we could hear him clicking at night'). He would let the children feed the kiln, using a special long-handled shovel. They'd say, 'How many shovelfulls?', and he'd tell them how much to put in.

There were steps going up the side of the kiln and at the top of them was a little wooden landing. Rowdy used to sit out there on hot evenings when he was doing a night shift. And, at night, the children loved to hear the clicking of the lids as he moved about. If any of them cried in the night, he'd come over to the fence and call out, 'All right, Rowdy's here. You're all right!'

Coal for the kiln used to be stacked up against the Kellow's fence. The weight of the coal parted the palings and there were always plenty of pieces coming through. The Kellows made good use of them. Mr Spears and Mrs Kellow used to joke about this. They were good friends; Mrs Kellow used to go and clean the office for Spears.

When Alice was thirteen, they moved to 25 Fletcher Street. It was a bigger house, and new, and her mother bought it. Later it was sold to the Auburn Bowling Club and enabled them to have a winter green on the site of that house and the one next door.

Mrs Kellow was born Alice Mary Howard. Her parents came from Birmingham, where her father, who had been educated at the Blue Coat school, was an engraver. Her two eldest sisters, Nell and Kate, were born in England and the rest (there were about ten children, Alice Austin thinks), in Australia. They lived in Mary Street, Richmond, and her father at that stage made wire hanging baskets for plants. Alice Howard worked for Ireland's florist shop in the Eastern Market and walked there and back every day from Richmond.

She was a capable woman, raising her children, managing the family money and going out to work cleaning houses. 'She used to take me at times.' All the children were born at home, but 'I can't remember anything about births. We were sent down to our

aunty's'. Alice Kellow sewed the children's clothes. When they lived next to the brickyard, she cooked in a 'colonial oven', which had a fire (often coal which had slipped through the palings from next door) both above and below the oven cavity. The meals were very good. One day her son said, 'Mum, you never made that stew big enough. You should have made it in the copper'.

Her husband, Charles Francis Kellow, worked for the brick-yards at first, as a carter, but in the time Alice Austin remembers him, he was employed by the Hawthorn Council. She thinks he began on the garbage truck and then went on to road work. He enlisted for service early in World War 1. In the expectation that he would be going away, the whole family went to the Ainar Studio in Burwood Road, near Hepburn Street, to have their photograph taken. But then he didn't go. He was rejected for health reasons. He kept on with the Council and when the Depression came he was made a ganger, in charge of relief workers building the Kew Boulevard. 'He used to pity some of the men; they were men that were never used to hard work. He would say, "Don't work too hard. Don't kill yourself on it"'. He was a good man. When he died, one of the workers, Mr Bert Bowers, remembering the time, put a death notice in *The Sun* praising him for his humanity.

His family were Comish. His father was a tin miner before he emigrated. His mother, Lavinia, came out from Cornwall later and the couple married in Victoria. They lived in a tent in Melbourne at first, but by the time Charles Kellow was born, the last of ten children, they had a house in the mining area of Blackwood.

Young Alice Kellow was a sickly child. When she was about three she became ill with polio. 'I can just remember little faint things - my mother singing out, "Come on, get up, get up, come on, get up." I said, "I can't. I can't walk," and she said, "Well run!" ... When I was that long coming out, she came and got me and I dropped. I remember being in a pram on the front verandah, getting spoilt, of course. I always wore boots for years, I remember, because I hated them. Everybody had shoes and I had boots ... My mother used to take me somewhere and get massaged - so she told me -I don't remember much about that,' but it was a long way, past the city. The treatment was successful and her muscles didn't waste away.

She doesn't remember how long the illness lasted, but she thinks one effect was to make her into a loner. She got used to being on her own and didn't play with her sisters much. She liked animals. Often she brought cats home, but they were always gone by morning. Her mother saw to that. So, I used to teach the chooks school. I had a little chook called Biddy and I used to wheel her round in the dolls' pram ... Biddy was a quiet little chook. She'd got so she'd get in (the pram) and stay in it.' She liked dolls and used to make dresses for her celluloid dolls and for the Kewpie dolls with bows on their heads.

When she was six or seven, Doctor Clucas* took out her tonsils. The operation was done at home - on the dining room table. She doesn't recall who gave the anaesthetic but she thinks it was probably her mother.

The Kellow family never went on holidays. 'I don't remember anyone ever going on holidays. We just used to play around at Christmas time, and that, play in the paddocks. There were paddocks to play in in Camberwell Road. And the big drain. We used to walk up the big drain to Camberwell Station and come back.' After she had her tonsils out, she went to stay with an aunt in Bendigo, but she couldn't wait to get home. She was happy at home.

Mrs Kellow was a firm believer in home remedies. In the Spanish 'flu** epidemic, the family next door fell ill. The Olivers, they got the 'flu and my father went in and shaved him before he went to the hospital and my mother went in and did for them and we were never kept away from them and we never got it. My mother used to get a bit of sulphur on a piece of paper and blow it down our throats. We didn't like it but we had to do it. I used to suffer with my throat. My mother used to get a chook's feather, pluck it, leave a few feathers on the top, and paint my throat with tincture of quinine. Oh, that was terrible! But I had to put up with it.'

Every Saturday morning, Alice Kellow put three cups of senna tea out on the back table, one for each of the girls, with a sweet beside each cup to take the taste away. 'She never had time to stop and see if you drank it, so Winnie and I used to give ours to Hazel. She'd drink ours to get the lolly.' Another regular laxative dose was sulphur and treacle. The children's hair was kept clean with 'squashy chips***'. 'They'd boil it up and wash your head out with it. And if you got lice in your head, you had no mercy.' Her brother would grab her and inspect her head to see if she had lice.

* Dr Elizabeth Clucas, who had her surgery for many years at 648 Burwood Road, Hawthorn.

** The Spanish Flu epidemic just after World War 1. The flu killed more people round the world than had died in the war.

*** Quassia chips. The bark and wood of the quassia tree was used for medicinal purposes.

When she was a little girl, Alice Austin was able to go to a free kindergarten run by the Misses Cochrane in the hall of the Augustine Congregational Church. She and her friend Beattie Prudden, from the other side of Camberwell Road, used to walk to kindergarten together by themselves. And then, like the other Kellow children, she went to Auburn State School. Alice Austin didn't really like school. 'There was one strict teacher, but I never really had him, who was down on the boys; he was very strict. And Robert Short, the Headmaster. He lived up in Hastings Road and used to come down past our place to go to school. A big tall chap. We used to walk down with him thinking how lovely it was to walk down with the Headmaster. He was a fine chap. One day, we must have been a bit ahead of him. We had to go through gates to go to the school - at the railway line. We were there and they were starting to build the bridges over and we were

all standing there watching and he came and tapped us, "Come on, children, get off to school. No need to watch that." I can remember them getting built, those railway bridges.'

Although the family belonged to the Church of England, they worshipped at the Augustine Congregational Church in Burwood Road. She remembers Sister Roberts* there, who was always dressed up with a little bonnet on. All the women used to go down to Sister Roberts and take their children. Amongst them there were the Crumps, the Borrowdales, the Nashes and the Coopers.

The Kellow children went to Sunday School in the church hall, and afterwards they visited the Cochrane family's private hospital, "Edlington", where they were welcomed and given grapes. Then they went home and took off their Sunday clothes and put on their old ones again. 'You weren't allowed to play around in your best clothes.' They always had a roast dinner on Sunday and Mrs Austin still cooks a roast on Sunday, even though she now lives alone.

* Maynard Davies, in his book *Beyond My Grasp* (Sydney, Alpha Books, 1978, page 82) mentions Sister Roberts, who was the Church Mission sister.

The three girls, with their friends in other families, the Nashes, and the Coopers, became Girl Guides under the leadership of Miss Gwen Swinburne. The Guides also used the Augustine Church Hall, with its central space and small rooms leading off it. The troop would assemble in the main hall and then the different patrols would go off to different rooms. They didn't ever go camping; they concentrated on activities like knot-tying. Young Alice Austin loved being a Guide but in her late teens other interests took over and she left.

She didn't want to go on with her education when she left school. It didn't interest her; all the girls left school and went to work. She didn't get a job straight away, but one day, when she was fifteen, she heard that Redrobe's, a boys' tailoring firm in the city, wanted girls. I said "I don't mind sewing", and I went and I stayed there till I got married.'

Redrobe's was a family affair. The boss was Robert Charles Redrobe. Anne was the forelady. Dick was the presser, who also worked the button-hole machine. Another member of the Redrobe family, Mary, was part of the concern, but she didn't come in often. Anne used to instruct the new girls and she organised the annual stocktake, which Alice Austin hated. It was so boring having to count small items like buttons. The Redrobes 'weren't strict - I mean you had to do proper work - but they were very good to work for'. When she joined the firm the premises were in Kirk's Bazaar in Little Bourke Street (it used to be a horse bazaar) but later they moved to Hardware Street, between Lonsdale and Little Lonsdale Street. Later too, they expanded their work to include men's wear.

It was not an apprenticeship; she learned on the job. It was all machine work; there was no hand finishing. They might just show you how to do a pocket, or you'd learn how to do a fly -there were flies in the pants, no zips- and you'd learn to do that. And gradually you'd do the whole article from start to finish.' At first she earned 12/6 a week but when she went on to piece work like the others, she was paid according to how hard she worked. Mary used to inspect the finished work and if something was wrong with it - for instance, if the lining was showing - she'd bring it back and it would have to be done again. 'I used often to go down to warehouses in Flinders Lane. Sometimes they'd want the labels changed. They were cardboard, thick paper labels ... they were sewn on by machine... and when I went down there I had to take them off and put them on by hand. I don't know why they changed the labels but the warehouses wanted it.'

Redrobe's firm employed about thirty workers in her time. The electric sewing machines were arranged in rows so that the workers faced each other, with a trough down the middle. As the garment was finished, it was dropped into the trough. All the work was done in one big room: the lighting was adequate but it was never heated in winter or cooled in summer. It was very cold in winter; Mrs Kellow used to crochet petticoats for Alice to keep her warm. In summer, If it was hot, it was hot. You didn't get fans.'

They worked from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Alice Austin caught the train at Auburn and walked up from Hinders Street Station.

She took her lunch and ate it sitting at her machine. There was an urn, she thinks, and they were able to make a hot cup of tea. She gave all her money to her mother and was given half-a-crown pocket money back, and 'as you earned more money, you were given more back'. They paid a shilling per week union fees but she doesn't remember any union action. There was no annual holiday entitlement and of course there was no sick pay, 'if you got sick, you got sick and you didn't go to work.'

In their late teens, she and Hazel loved to go dancing. At first they went to Percy Silk's classes on the corner of Glenferrie Road and Linda Crescent, opposite to where Coles New World supermarket is now. He was a 'tall thin chap' and very strict. He wouldn't allow anyone to do the Charleston. He had a 'White Night' once a year where the girls had to wear white dresses and shoes. But later they started to go over to Footscray to the Trocadero or to the Green Mill, where the Arts Centre is now. They could do the Charleston there. T used to make my sister's and my dresses - sleeveless dresses, straight from the top right down to the bottom (with) fringes. And when you'd do the Charleston, the fringes would jump up and down.'

Alice and Hazel went dancing by train. It was quite safe then to come home afterwards in the train and to walk to their house from Camberwell Station. 'We often talk about it now, us old ones. We could go out on our own and never be afraid to come home.' Both the Trocadero and the Green Mill opened at 8.00 p.m. and they always found plenty of partners and danced waltzes and the foxtrot, the Pride of Erin and many other popular steps of the time. One of the partners might ask you for the Supper Dance and you would go and have sandwiches and cake and a cup of tea. There was never any alcohol. We never thought of smoking then.

Never thought of smoking. My mother would have killed us at any rate, but I can't remember ever being asked to have a drink or a smoke.' Mr Kellow sometimes protested at their social activities. If they were going out and eating their tea in a hurry, he'd say, What are you hurrying for? You're not going out that gate tonight. But somehow they always went.

And worse was to come. Hair bobbing came in in the twenties. Hazel was the first one. She had a shingle; it was cut like a boy's hair cut. 'My father looked at her, didn't say anything - looked -because we'd started to grin. "You can grin", he said, "but you won't go out till that hair grows.'" Hazel found the answer. She sewed side pieces onto her hat - made from her sisters' hair. 'She grabbed us and cut a bit of our hair off.' And with these side pieces on she looked as though she had hair.

It was a losing battle. There was trouble as each daughter dared to cut her hair. Alice had hers done at home by one of her sisters, who put a basin on her head and cut round it. Finally Mrs Kellow herself succumbed and all the women wore short hair.

In 1931 she married Robert Austin and stopped work. 'My sisters stopped, they didn't go out to work. I didn't go out to work. My friends didn't seem to go out to work.' Women didn't work if they were married then. They stayed home and looked after the children. The Austins had two sons, Jack and Robert.

Robert Austin had lived at 40 Fletcher Street, opposite the Kellows. He worked for *The Herald* as a van driver. He started by delivering papers to shops but later he used to be sent down to the wharves to collect big rolls of paper and deliver them to the *Herald* office. He earned £5/0/0 per week. Although they had married in the middle of the Depression, it didn't worry them. 'He worked right through it. You could live well on five pounds a week. You could get a cauliflower for threepence and meat was cheap. Shoes were cheap. I always could dress all right and I made the boys' pants.'

They rented a house in Munro Street at first, but later, Alice Kellow bought a house opposite her own at 32 Fletcher Street (it cost £424). 'My mother handled the money in the house ... She never asked my father could she buy a house.' She offered it to them and they moved into it. At first they paid rent, but after about twelve years, she gave them the opportunity to buy it as they had done a great deal of work on it. Like her mother, Alice Austin managed the family money; 'I gave her £1000 for it - gave her so much down and paid her off. I said to my husband one night, "This house is ours now. He said, "It's only ten months." I said "I've paid for it - my mother's given me the deeds.'" They lived there for forty-two years until he died. Then she sold it for \$30,000 and bought a flat. This cost \$26,000 but by 1986 it was worth \$79,000.

Now she lives in Mooroolbark. She went up there to be near her niece, Mrs Rachuba, but she still goes back to Hawthorn once a week to join in the activities of the Peppercorn Club, and once a fortnight for the Combined Pensioners Union. Looking back over her childhood, she thinks that the main difference between her children and that of today's children is discipline. 'At home, we couldn't just tell our mother "no", we wouldn't do it, we had to do what we were told. You'd get a smack. At school - the teachers taught you. They were fair. You didn't like to get into trouble. You were brought up in the house that you didn't go mad. You did what you were told and you did it at school.' Discipline makes you more tolerant of people.

Alice Austin is not a religious person but she believes in the power of goodness. She told her children, 'If you do anybody a bad harm, you can expect a bad harm to come back to you. If you do a good turn, well you've done a good turn and that's that. Perhaps these days she is being rewarded for the good turns she has done in her life for as she says, 'I was the skinny one. I was the one that was always sick, but here I am lingering on longer than any of them...!'