Doug Smith - Childhood memories of Milton-under-Wychwood 1950s – 1960s

In Memory of Doug Smith 1945-2026

(Photograph courtesy the Smith family).

Doug Smith contacted the Wychwoods Local History Society in 2025 about his childhood memories of living in 'The Shoe Shop', Milton-under-Wychwood, the address now known as No. 64 High Street.

There followed an entire year of correspondence with Doug, during which I learned that Doug was battling with cancer, and on 5th September 2026 he sadly lost that battle. It thus felt appropriate to compile Doug's memories into this short article.

Doug's emails give an account of a boyhood lived in Milton in the 1950s and early 1960s, a period now rapidly fading from local memory. Doug's memories are colourful and vivid. Though they are from the mid-20th Century, they describe a life that would not be unfamiliar to our Victorian ancestors - a period when people worked locally, plucked chickens, and had sculleries, coal houses, pig sties and outside WCs. I present those memories here largely in Doug's own words, though some details of the story are filled out from the Wychwood Local History Society's own records.

Family Background

Doug's mother and father were Robert J Smith (Bob) and Ena Gregory. Bob was born in on 6th June at Wooburn Green, Bucks, He trained as a saddler. Doug writes:
His first marriage was to Minnie Ada Rolling who was born in 1896. She was a spinster living in Merton, South London. They were married in Mitcham on 31/07/1921, also South London. At that time Dad was in the Royal Hampshire Regiment in Croydon so I'm assuming that's where they met.

Robert and Minnie had two daughters, Margaret born in 1922 and Joyce born in 1924 in Oxford. Minnie died in 1929.

Bob's second marriage was to Lydia Agnes Bowne, who was born at Faringdon in 1901. Bob and Lydia were married on 21st September 1930 at St Frideswide Church, Oxford. They lived at 8 Hill View Road, Osney, Oxford. Their daughter, Audrey, was born in 1934, she died in 2024 aged 90. Bob was widowed again following the death of Lydia in 1937, Doug writes: ". . . *imagine a single father bringing up three girls before the outbreak of WW2".*

Bob married for a third time in 1943 at the age of 44. He married Ena Phyllis Gregory at Swinbrook Church, with a guard of honour provided by the Home Guard; at this time Bob was a Drill Sergeant with the Milton-under-Wychwood branch of the Home Guard. Ena had been born in the Wantage area on 1st February 1917, and in 1939 we find her working as a house maid in an academic household at No. 13, Norham Gardens, Oxford (1939 Register). At the time of her marriage she was living at South Lawn, Swinbrook - the former home of the Mitford family - and probably moved out of Oxford after the start of War to take up a position at Swinbrook House (now South Lawn), at that time occupied by the McKinnon family.

Wedding of Bob and Ena at Swinbrook, summer, 1943. Sergeant Bob Smith, the drill sergeant in the Milton Home Guard Platoon, who formed the Guard of Honour, married Miss Gregory of South Lawn. No wedding bells could ring because that was the signal that invasion had started!

Bob's daughters, Margaret and Joyce were bridesmaids at the wedding and appear in some additional wedding photographs sent by Doug.

Following their marriage Bob and Ena had two sons. Doug born on 19th September in Chipping Norton Hospital and Alan born on 7th April 1950. Bob Smith died in Witney on 11th May 1968.

Earliest Memories.

Doug writes: *My earliest memory is the winter of 1947 but mainly because there is a photo of me in floods of tears on the steps leading up to our garden. I remember the circus on The Green, The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth 2nd and climbing on the church wall to catch a glimpse of Princess Margaret who stayed with the Astors in Bruern Abbey.*

After the war a number of German prisoners [Displaced Persons] remained in the camp on Frog Lane because they could not go back to East Germany. One of them, Oscar Schindler (not the famous one), came to help with the cobbler 'Bill' Markham. He'd do some gardening for us and we'd invite him for Sunday dinner. I was four when he made me a banjolele which I've treasured . . . Oscar returned to Germany around 1952. He settled in Heidelburg as he couldn't return to his family home in East Germany. We exchanged Christmas cards for a few years but that eventually stopped and we lost contact.

Doug goes on to recall that in later life he donated the‘ banjolele’ to the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock, and it is still preserved there.

The 'banjolele' gifted to Doug by Oskar Schindler, now preserved at the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock.
(Courtesy SOFO Museum, Woodstock)

Doug shares a schooldays’ memory from his sister, Audrey:

She attended Milton Primary School and at one morning assembly the children were warned by the Headmistress not to touch any of the balloons they might find in the hedgerows. There were Italians in the prison camp [Displaced Persons Camp on Frog Lane] who were allowed to help the farmers. They were not going to escape and were clearly happy to mix with the locals! Hence the warning.

Photograph of displaced persons at the former Nissan huts on Frog Lane, about 1950. Is Oskar Schindler in this photograph? (ref cpc0129)

The Old Shoe Shop.

Doug recounts that the 'Shoe Shop', his childhood home, once housed a Temperance café; a story only known through local memory. The house has a plaque on the front with the initials IC and the date 1891. The initials are those of Isaac Castle (1824-1891). Isaac was an important member of the local Primitive Methodist chapel, located in The Square in Milton. The Primitive Methodists had strong 'Temperance' sympathies, and it was Isaac Castle who started this Temperance café. We do not know when it first became a shoe shop; it may have been the initiative of Bob Smith.

The Temperance Cafe - view of Milton High Street, Doug's former home is the house with the canopy over the bay window. Photograph from about 1920s. ***(ref awv509)***

Doug gives the following description of the family home:

Our home was 'The Shoe Shop'. There was no need for house numbers as everyone knew the house and the shop. Looking at the house from the front, there were two sitting rooms either side of the shop. The right-hand room was where I heard of the death of J. F. Kennedy whilst listening to Radio Luxembourg. The front door only led to the shop. At that time access to the house was around a drive to the left and opened out to a back yard. The back of the house had a kitchen with a range, a scullery and a large pantry. A door from the kitchen led to a staircase and landing where there were 4 bedrooms, and a bathroom.

William Markham the cobbler who had his own small bedroom. No relation. He's buried in the graveyard behind the Baptist Chapel.

In the yard were three sheds. a coal store, the garage and the only toilet.

The garden was very large. Ten apple trees and two long vegetable plots, plus a lawn and some pig sties and a 'two seater' toilet.

We were fortunate that the garden was big enough to produce potatoes, green vegetables and fruit. I remember a large plot of rhubarb as well as apples from our ten trees and loganberries. Dad sometimes brought home a rabbit he'd been given and occasionally a chicken which I had to pluck.

The bungalow built next to our house now occupies all of that garden which gives an idea of how large it was.

Dad was asthmatic so the gardening was done by 'Dicky' Kite who lived across the road.

Next door was 'The Butcher's Arms' run by Mr and Mrs Haney. Their son Jack married my older half-sister Audrey . . .

My parents only rented the house so when the owner decided to sell, we had to move out. They couldn't afford the asking price of around £2000. Dad managed Timms & Co a leather merchants in Oxford on Castle Street in front of the prison.

When Dr Scott (senior) [Gordon Scott] bought the house it became the surgery and its life as a family home ended.

As Doug recalls listening to the news of the death of J F Kennedy on the radio at the Old Shoe Shop, we can assume that he was still living there in November 1963 and must have moved to Witney shortly afterwards.

Doug went on to train as a teacher, which he became. He married and spent most of his adult life in Nottingham, not far from his beloved cricket ground at Trent Bridge.

I would like to thank the family of Doug Smith in the preparation of this article, and Carol Anderson of the WLHS for filling in some of the family history detail.

John Bennett, October 2026