

CHAPTER 6

The nursery land was originally bought by Myrtle's father and his father in 1930 after they had been using it since 1927 - it took nearly three years to negotiate the final contract! As part of that contract, it was agreed that the land would be freehold but there were various covenants included to protect the owners of surrounding houses already built and to come. There was just a narrow, 10 foot wide and 100 feet long access drive up quite a steep slope from Hamilton Way. Grandfather Webb also bought the house, number 13, that was on one side of the drive at the end of a terrace and moved in there at about the same time. In the 40's, Myrtle and her family moved from another part of Finchley into number 13 when her grandparents died. The most important covenant, as far as we were concerned then, was the one that gave permission for 'a bungalow residence' to be built on the land. As the Webbs had bought 13, they never had any need to take up that permission, so it was open for us to do so, provided that the covenant holder would approve the plans, as necessary due to the wording of the covenant. So, we were only looking for ideas for a bungalow. When we got involved, the land was almost surrounded by houses on three sides and another nursery was on the fourth side.

As soon as we had agreed with Poppa Webb (the boys name for Myrtle's father) that we would like to build a home on the old nursery ground, then we started looking for ideas. In the public library we found a book of 'Best Designs for the Year.....'. In that there were two bungalows that we liked the look of. We also found in that book that there was a central organisation for architects, so we rang them for advice on who to choose. They could not actually favour one architect over another, so gave us names and addresses for some of the nearest ones to us. At the same time, we started looking for possible sources of building finance.

During our work with Youth Drama, we had met and become friendly with one of the Borough's aldermen. He, although quite an elderly man at the time, was very active in youth work and we got to know him quite well. He helped us to apply for a building loan from the Borough. For an architect, we simply chose the firm who turned out to be nearest and made an appointment to go and see them. It turned that they were a firm who mostly designed factories and offices, but the junior partner liked the idea of getting involved with something new, so we were handed over to him! We showed him the ideas from the design book and told him how much money we thought we might be able to raise and he agreed a time with us to have a look at the land. So, we had started the ball rolling, but did not tell anyone that we had just £ 30 in savings at the time!

Mr Selley, the junior partner of Vine and Vine, soon put us straight on the practicalities of what we could build on the land and for the money. However, many years later, we found those old design pictures and it was interesting to see how similar to them, with the later changes that we made, the bungalow ended up. We quickly agreed a draft design and Mr Selley applied to the local planning committee for outline approval. In the process, we were asked by the Borough if we wanted to number our house as number 15 - up till then, the nursery land had never had a road number and was just referred to as Hamilton Nurseries. As making it 15 would have

meant renumbering the rest of the road, we said that we did not mind simply calling it 13a. We have never thought of 13 as being unlucky for us, so that is what was agreed. We also asked Mr Selley to include in the design a living room large enough for the grand piano that we had acquired and a photographic darkroom. The piano was in exchange for making curtains for the Finchley Youth Hall as everyone was getting fed up of lifting it on and off the stage so it was replaced by an upright, and the darkroom was to replace the coal cellar in the flat that replaced the wardrobe in the rented room!

Everything about the final design was very up to date! At one point in the design stage, Mr Selley pointed out to us that the nice stone faced fireplace and chimney breast that we had asked for would be more expensive than a central heating system - real out of this world luxury! He also designed a shallow, single pitch roof for us that included insulation and added a, very simple, insulation layer under the suspended floor. We also asked for a cat door! At that time, there were very few available in pet shops, so Mr Selley just designed a tunnel through the wall, lined with slates, and we made our own flap on the outside. Once we moved in, then I built a window seat (doubled as a piano stool) over the inside of the hole with another flap so Richard and Susie could go in and out with the seat acting as an air lock to keep out any draughts. In fact the design was so far in advance of its time that four funny things happened.

- The local gas board got involved in the installation of a new type of hot air heating system for which they had just become the agents and as part of the special deal they gave us, they had our permission to bring potential clients to look at it once we had moved in. Those visits continued for several years.

- The sub-contractors to the builders who installed the roof worked to their usual imperial dimensions on the roof timbers but found that that did not match the metric sizes of the new insulation materials so by the third section it was obvious that it would never fit. They had to get the bricklayer back to remove the finished tops of all the walls so that they could remove and reposition all the roof timbers!

- The carpenter did not think that 'arkitekts' knew much so ignored the rolls of floor insulation paper until told to take up half the floors and relay them again with the paper laid on the joists first!

- No old lead or steel water pipes for us - even the long run from the road was in copper. This led to a problem a short time after we moved in as the traces of fresh copper in the water reacted with the hot water and the aluminium in our electric kettle to turn it into a fair imitation of a sieve! At first we just thought that our wedding present was getting old, so simply bought a new one. After a few more months, the same thing started to happen - small holes temporarily blocked by a white powder started to appear in the aluminium. Mr Selley arranged to have the water checked for us and the Water Board found that the water standing in the long pipe was picking up a just measurable amount of copper and it was the copper reacting with the aluminium that caused the aluminium to turn into a sulphate powder. We then bought all new pans and a kettle made of copper or stainless steel and never had any more trouble. In fact, it may have done us a good turn as many years later a connection was thought to be established between aluminium in people's diet and Alzheimers disease and an old friend of ours swore that he and his wife were free of arthritis in their 80's because once a month he added a copper pellet to their tea water!

Mr Selley reckoned that the roof should last us 20 years before it would need recovering and in fact it lasted for 25 with just a couple of minor repairs. The only real mistakes that were made were in the design of the new heating system which proved to be about half the capacity that was needed and us only being able to afford two bedrooms, so it was lucky that our second child turned out to be another boy! (To save some money, we arranged with Mr Selley that we would install all the electrical wiring and fittings ourselves.)

When we moved into 13a in November 1958, one month ahead of schedule, Myrtle was expecting in February and we just had Michael, Richard and Susan. Poppa Webb still had half of the nursery land as he had not finally decided to quit the nursery business altogether and so most of the greenhouses and sheds were still there. To be honest, they were in very bad condition and I suppose we were rather living in ramshackle surroundings for some years. But, it was great for the boys and we also made use of the old wooden garage (originally a stable and then later a lorry shed!) and parts of the greenhouses. Our bungalow was actually built where the carnation beds used to be and next to the fruit tree storage area. Like much of the nursery, there were unsold plants growing from years before and so we had quite a nice selection of mature fruit trees right next to us. Poppa Webb had long ago decided to will the nursery land and his house to Myrtle so there was never going to be any problem to us with the remainder of the land no matter what he decided to do. In the end, he gave up any sort of business on the land and settled for working as a printer. What finally decided him was an offer from an old plant business in Finchley who had sold off their land alongside their shop in the 30's and thought that they would like to rent a small piece of land not too far away where they could have a few greenhouses and a small warehouse. They approached Poppa Webb who said it was up to us to decide. We thought that it could be good for us as they would clear all the old buildings and put up new ones and also concrete over the old packed-earth drive and pay us a small rent. So in 1968 we officially took over the ownership of the remainder of the land and rented it to Clements of Finchley, which was actually a partnership of three people. They applied for and got permission to erect three nice greenhouses, a boilerhouse and a warehouse and they agreed with us as part of the deal that they would provide the labour to build a double garage for us against the warehouse - we had already obtained permission ourselves for that, but had not yet saved enough money to pay for it! In the end, the final lease to them was drawn up to have a boundary around the junction of garage and warehouse and down the middle of the land in such a way that we could both officially have the use of the drive access. The solicitor we used pointed out that up to then, we had no actual access to our bungalow as the boundaries of Webb and Batchelors met at a corner - the original solicitor who had drawn that up in 1958 had by then absconded from his firm with many of their clients papers - luckily we had taken all ours from their office some years before.

This all starts to seem complicated, so I will summarise the position as in 1968 - we had a bungalow on about one third of the whole of the land: Clements had leased (with options for up to 21 years) about half of the land and the remaining piece was the site for our garage and an area for shared access to the drive. By about a year later, the warehouse and garage were built but Clements so delayed the rest of the planned building that they never ever got around to building any more - no greenhouses, no boilerhouse and not even the toilet in the warehouse! The space for the greenhouses

they just dug over from time to time to plant a few annuals and the rest of the time it just grew weeds, so in the end we told them that they were to stop spraying weedkiller and we would keep the ground tidy ourselves, take down the low wire fence and just make the part they never used look like part of our garden.

Now that that is all clear (? - see sketch!), back to the cats -

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