

Lady on a Motorbike

*Inspired by an interview with
Joan Emerson of Bishop's Stortford*



Cover photo Miss Joan Emerson , c. 1950s



Miss Joan Emerson , January 2017

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Foreword

From the year of 2005 when Bishop's Stortford Museum reopened, we established our mission to promote the importance of preserved and recorded memories of the past. The Museum as a cultural focal point always strived to offer a unique experience of sharing oral history narratives. This is how and why this booklet came about.

We encourage members of the local community to follow the example of Miss Joan Emerson and engage in the museum's project in order to shape the future of oral history that can inspire and educate a variety of audiences interested in the town's diverse history. This is an exciting resource that can bring subjects to life through the first-hand accounts of real people.

To make our Oral history archive more current, we decided to publish more booklets like this and also turn them into e-books available from Kindle stores.

Miss Joan Emerson was born on 9th October 1918 and she lived most of her life at 9 the Causeway, Bishop's Stortford. This is the attempt to turn her memories into a little booklet available to everyone.

Hope you will enjoy it!



*Miss Joan Emerson with her cat
Charlie, January 2017*

Life in the Causeway

I was born oh... shall I just say when everything was different to what it is now, eh....

My mother was born in Bishop's Stortford but my father was from Gloucestershire. My father was a manager of Walker's stores in Gloucestershire (a place called Oddington) he was the relief manager and he used to go around to different Walkers stores and take over when there was illness or holidays and that's how my mother met him because Walker's stores used to be in the Market square. My father was a stretcher-bearer in the WWI and he was awarded a military medal but he would never talk about it. He said there were braver man than him. *

* CAV Emerson, Royal Army Medical Corps, awarded Military Medal in 1919 for devotion to duty under fire.

The little market town of Bishop's Stortford and especially the area around the Causeway is what I could call home. Since I was young it truly changed a lot. Where there is the car park now was all trees, willow trees and where Waitrose is now, that was a swamp... There was also a river running between what is now Coopers yard and the Castle gardens. It was a very quiet place and every morning people used to sweep their part of the street and clean their brasses and scrub their doorsteps.

There were days when not a lot was going on, but I was never bored. Even just looking out of the window to see who was passing by, would make my day. I had a wonderful childhood!



A painting of the trees lined Causeway as it was in the early 1900s.

Bishop's Stortford Museum collection

Miss Emerson with her sister Rene and friends, c. 1930s, Private collection



Our Lovely House

Our house seemed really big to me and I was so glad that we could share it with my grandma who I loved dearly. She often used to make us laugh, like this one time when she went outside to the toilet- yes today's toilets are a pure luxury, but I will tell you more about that later.

Now let's go back to my sweet granny. So, she went outside and one of the pipes had burst! It was a very cold winter- just like this year's -she run inside to find an umbrella and went back outside again and after a few minutes later came back absolutely soaking wet since the split in the pipe opened up more and knocked her umbrella out of her hands and she was so absolutely wet! Now when I think of it I do feel sorry for her, but then, us little devils we thought that was wonderful! Only my good mother was trying to hush us up and get my grandmother to the fire with a blanket round her.

As I was saying, we only had the outside toilet, so imagine a windy night with the owls hooting and the bats flying and you with only a candle to light your way...Sometimes you would get nearly there and the candle would blow out, so you had to come back again! Oh, that was really an exercise to master! Not to mention that our version of toilet paper was newspaper which we cut into pieces and put on a piece of string and hung outside by the door next to the bucket...

The house itself was brick built in the front but it was wattle and daub in the back nearly half a foot wide, so it was always very warm and comfortable. We had only gas for lighting in the front room. We used to sit around the kitchen table with the oil lamp in the middle, doing various things. Mother mending, my father reading, my sister doing a lot of embroidery and guess what I did! Of all the things, I had a fret-saw and used to make pipe racks and I made a whole lot!

There was no gas upstairs so we needed to take a candle. I was always taken a-back a little with what could happen and how it didn't catch fire? But alas, one night my father and mother went to bed and as usual they took a candle each and put it on the pillow. In the morning I saw my mum with her hair all frizzy because hair doesn't burn and yes as you can guess, the candle caught her hair...

My grandmother was the only one to have a fireplace in her bedroom thank God! We loved that so much because we could go up and sit in front of the fire to make our toast or during long winter nights do our chestnuts! I absolutely loved it. I can still see some of the pictures that we used to make in the fire. When it sparks and all the sparks went up the chimney we used to say – oh these are birds getting ready to go abroad or the children getting ready to go to school... We also had that ritual of having a bath every Friday in the kitchen in front of the stove...What great memories!



Mr and Mrs Emerson in the garden of their final abode c. 1960s

School Days

Now, let me tell you about my school days...

I went to the Church of England Hockerill School and I can tell you it was a very good school.

We had to take slippers with us so we never sat in the classroom in wet feet!

Very good for our health, eh!

I remember many of the Mayday poles that I enjoyed a lot. We would need to practise very hard, but every now and then we would get tangled.

Yes, it really was a good school.

Nevertheless from the Causeway where I lived it was a long way to Hockerill school and we used to come out of our house and go up the Causeway to Dane Street. On one side there was the Castle moat and the other side there was trees all the way up from one end of the Causeway to Dane Street. So we used to have quite a lot of fun running to school round the trees and that...

I loved running in the fields that was part of our morning routine... Also, there was no railing up by the river that ran around the moat so if you went too near the bushes there and fell through you'd end up in the river but we were very good and cautious so I can't remember any of us falling...

There was lovely kingfishers, beautiful kingfishers I will never forget. I can't really see them nowadays, but the memory is so strong that each time I pass it by it feels like they are there...

I hear people are talking about global warming, but I can tell you one summer when I was very young it was very, very hot and somebody said it's hot enough to fry eggs on the pavement. So believe it or not, on our way to school, we were passing a group of people who were very loud and actually they did fry eggs on the pavement! Oh yes, people used to do funny things like that in those days.



Hockeril school , postcard collection Bishop's Stortford museum

Miss Emerson with her sister Rene c. 1920s



The Cattle used to run...

What is also funny now, but when I look back it was almost life-threatening, is my adventure with the bulls...

One day after school I went with an axe and a black sack for firewood for my mother and crossed over the line which you're not supposed to at the so called Dunmow railway line across the Meads and I was right across to where the river was running. I went there and I was busy chopping up wood, when suddenly I heard this sound that was just like a steam train! It was a very, very hot day and I looked up only to see bullocks with big horns and white faces running towards me! I ran for my life and jumped into the river where I sat amongst the bulrushes. Just me and the lovely bulrushes that were trying to hide me....The mad beasts were stomping but they couldn't get to me and eventually they got over it.

I had to get home all wet and desperately trying not to see anybody. Anyhow, my mother saw it happening and all she commented was: 'Oh there is my daughter!'

On market days the bullocks used to come down Bridge Street white faces, big horns...and there was a slaughter house up at Apton Road, behind what is Greggs now. French the butcher did his own slaughter...

What can I tell you – the cattle definitely used to run through the Causeway...Once they got into the baker's shop that's by the traffic light, next to Dorringtons. I need to say they weren't the nicest people and once on market days which were Thursday and Saturdays when the cows got loose from the herd they got in their shop and everything went all over the place. You can imagine we as kids were very pleased...

We used to love to look out of the window and of course on a market day there used to be the pigs in the pokes, that is the pig was too fat to walk so they bought them in a great big cart on wheels and that's why they say you shouldn't buy a pig in a poke because while it's in the cart you can't see what's wrong, if it's an old pig or its not healthy.

On these days it was interesting for me to listen to different kind of speech from which I can tell which village the people came from.

*Cattle Market , Bishop's Stortford in 1960s
Bishop's Stortford Museum Collection*

These market days were very exciting since we also used to have the gypsies in, coming in with their horses and carts and also in North street, I don't know if it's still there, there used to be what they called a mounting stone so when the gentry came in with their horses they could mount or dismount again. There was also a drinking fountain for the horses, and the gypsies' horses and carts used to be all there. The traffic was two ways, both ways and it was very, very busy. In fact you could hardly move where Woolworths was there was so many people coming in from the countryside. Surely to accommodate people's needs there was so many small tea shops and people loved coming in and having a cup of tea and a fancy cake, there was so many places. There was three or four grocery shops all in one row by which is now Jackson Square.

On those market days as I've mentioned, the gypsies would come in and you always got a flower pushed in your face... Lucky face lady, lucky flowers! The good thing about gypsies is that they would always fight amongst themselves but they would never fight or be funny to you. Nevertheless if they knocked on your door and you gave them something you always had to go outside and have a look because they always put a mark on your house so they would know that you were easy...



Games To Play

Now, I was 14 at the beginning of the 20th century and you see, I had two sisters. Rene was year and a half younger than me and Pat was 12 and half years younger, only a baby. So my sister Rene used to play with Pat like she was her living doll, she used to dress her and take her out while I was nothing like that.

Others also enjoyed skipping rope and hoops but I was all into cricket. I was the only girl among the rest of the neighbour'-s' boys who were just a year or two older than me so I had to compete and keep up with them. So naturally I was used to boxing and wrestling and we used to paddle a lot!

We never played indoors ... We would go out in the fields all the time and we also went in the Castle gardens which was right near us. I remember how clever it was having a flag at the bottom of our garden and when it was near dinner time or meal times, our parents would bring the flag up so we could see while playing that it was time to go home.

We also used to have Causeway swimming pool, but it was cold... We had different changing rooms but the boys being boys, would poke holes through the walls of the dressing room to see the girls undressing. How naughty!

Swimming pool, Causeway. Internal view of swimming bath. Stort navigation warehouse was on the other side

Causeway, Swimming bath gates. Plaque reads: 'This bath was presented to the town of Bishop's Stortford by Mrs Thresham Gilbey in memory of her father the late Sir John Barker, baronet, who resided in the town for many years' 1924



Amusing Stortford

Stortford was always a very popular place. It is interesting that in Potter Street for example people really did pottery. They had a kiln and everything there. Likewise Bridge Street had a bridge...

Oh, it just crossed my mind when it came to entertainment I will never forget once we had a troupe of midgets. They walked with ropes across the hall ceiling that was in the South Street near Fire Station and we thought it was wonderful!

We also had two cinemas, one was called the fleapit. We used that expression humorously for a shabby cinema... There was a fleapit Phoenix that had best films and there was a new one the Regent. In those days to get in the Regent, was a great big queue down the yard that was a garage. The Regent was where Marks and Spencer's is now and it was very high class one.

Talking of high class there was a shop The Grocers in North Street. I had a bit of an edge on you because I knew the people who worked in there. It was very high class indeed and they did wines. It is interesting that you could go in with your bottle, the wine that you bought and they will pour it... they always smelled your bottle though and sometimes would take it away... Just to let you know, that shop was Holland and Barretts which is now on the corner where HSBC is had a tea shop as well. First of all they had antique place upstairs, my aunt May she was good on that sort of things. They got big cheeses and people can taste the cheese before they bought it. You have to wait your turn though... and they were never hurried. It was very nice of them to always tell people how to cook things if you didn't know.



*Phoenix and Regent cinema in Bishop's Stortford c.1930s
Bishop's Stortford Museum Collection*



Eccentric Stortfordians

It is not just the streets and shops, but also the people that make the history of Bishop's Stortford so interesting. I can tell you, we had quite a few characters in good old Bishop's Stortford. And mentioning posh, we had the toffs and they used to come at 7 o'clock every night underneath our upstairs window and all in their bowler hats or top hats and their dark clothes and their umbrellas.

My sister Rene and I used to go upstairs and used to take my mother's flour dredger and lean out of the window and shake flour over them ...

If my mother knew she would've killed us! Toffs lived up Windhill, there were big houses ...

But there were also cases like the example of so called Blind Tom who used to stand by the road and say: "Anybody see me across the road?" and you'd get half way with him and he'd say: 'could you give me a copper for a cup of tea?' Then when you got to the other side and you got away a little while he'd say: "Can anybody see me across the road?" He must have made quite a lot. His name was Tommy and his sister played the piano beautifully she used to play for the dances and things because we used to have a lot of dance halls and we used to have a lot of dancing and if she knew he was doing that she would've killed him.

Emma Pope was another interesting character who made her living out of helping older people doing their shopping. What was unusual about her is that during the war she used to wear a long Mackintosh man's coat and a man's hat and man's boots! The two great cotton wool lumps in her ears would be poking out that would complete her look!

*Miss Emerson and her relatives in period costumes c. 1970s
Private collection*

But the most bad-mannered one was the owner of two hotels– I don't want to name him.

Although he was well off and had his portrait painted and also exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art, London, people said in the town that he couldn't write his name. He was a really little rough man. I witnessed once when his wife fell down there 3 steps and he shouted in a shop full of people, shoppers 'there she goes, there she goes, ass over head, ass over head!' And the poor women if you could've seen it... I'll never forget that...

He was also very rude toward a Jamaican girl who used to live in Stortford... During the war there were American soldiers we called them Yanks at Stansted and they were coming to Stortford very often. But black and white soldiers were not allowed to go to dances on the same night. One night the blacks go in and the other night the whites went in. Then at Causeway we had to lock our door at night because the Yanks would come and say 'any ladies here, any ladies here?' They were so outgoing! We were not used to it. Anyhow, when the Yanks came in this rude man tried to take them off but they really duffed him up and I think he lost his eye on that occasion.



Oh My Love, My Love

Years passed, I started working and beside boxing, wrestling and cricket I gained a new passion in life- that is motorbikes! I had a lot of different jobs but the one that I ended up doing until I was 60 was making photo cells and solar cells in Harlow. I was the only woman that was allowed to do that because I'm good at machinery, in fact I nearly caused strikes three times because I was on machinery and I used to take my own to bits when it went wrong and put it together again. The men that were supposed to do it got all narky and in the end they gave me my own Allen key so I could do it but I didn't need that because I already got my own...It was an interesting job. I had to cut solar cells and it's so hard you had a diamond encrusted wheel and I had to cut them to 20 thou (1000 of an inch) and bring it down to 18/19 thou. I had to put a photograph on it and then bring the thing down so you had all little tiny pieces of it, and it was very, very expensive. When they told me it was fifty pounds a small slice likes that, for a couple of hours I couldn't do any more work.

At STC (Standard Telephones and Cable) company they did say to me if I was younger they would have sent me to these different schools and I could've done the machinery.

Anyhow, at first I used to get a lift into work, but then something very exciting happened: I got a motorbike and then even more exciting I had a motorbike and a sidecar. My first, a Francis Barnett 2- stroke oil and petrol mix and then I went for the 4-stroke and later I had an Ariel 600 with the double adult side car.

In those days all I needed to do to learn to drive was to stop up to Hockerill and watch bikers change gear and all that and I did it all on my own and I loved it.

So, I was able to take two or three people with me. I was living a dream! Not to mention that later I could afford even a Reliant 3 wheeler because I didn't have to go through the test again. Although the Reliant is exactly like a car no different, so why they allowed you to go from a motorbike to a car I've no idea and yet if I was to drive a four wheeled car I'd have had to pass my test all over again and I didn't want to do that.



*Miss Emerson with friends and relatives
c1960s Private collection*

Oh, how I loved my motorbike! It gave me so much freedom. We never had a lot of money to spend on going places, but camping trips to Clacton we could easily afford. I used to take my niece and nephews and then I had a trailer so we could put camping gear in it.

We also went further north all the way to Yorkshire on the motor bike and the side car. I took my mum to see her sister – oh, she was ever so grateful. When I had the Reliant we even went to Lake Windermere and all over England! But everything, especially travelling was so much easier in those days. I would usually drive 50mp/h but sometimes I would like to go wild and reach 70mp/h when each time I went into a speed wobble and believe you me that was frightening! I had the side car coming off as I was showing off and you have to lean over and hold on and get it back again. Phew!

I needed to stop riding my bike when I was 70 and I am not allowed to mow my own lawn now, they won't let me... But how great were those days when I used to have my pyjamas underneath tucked in my socks and then my trousers and then me leathers. Not leathers as they are today. And helmet of course. It was funny that geared like that we would often be confused with a man and once my friend took the advantage of that and instead of queuing in front of the ladies room went into the gentlemen's without anyone complaining.... I was surely the only female biker in Stortford but with all the clothes no one could tell it's a female.

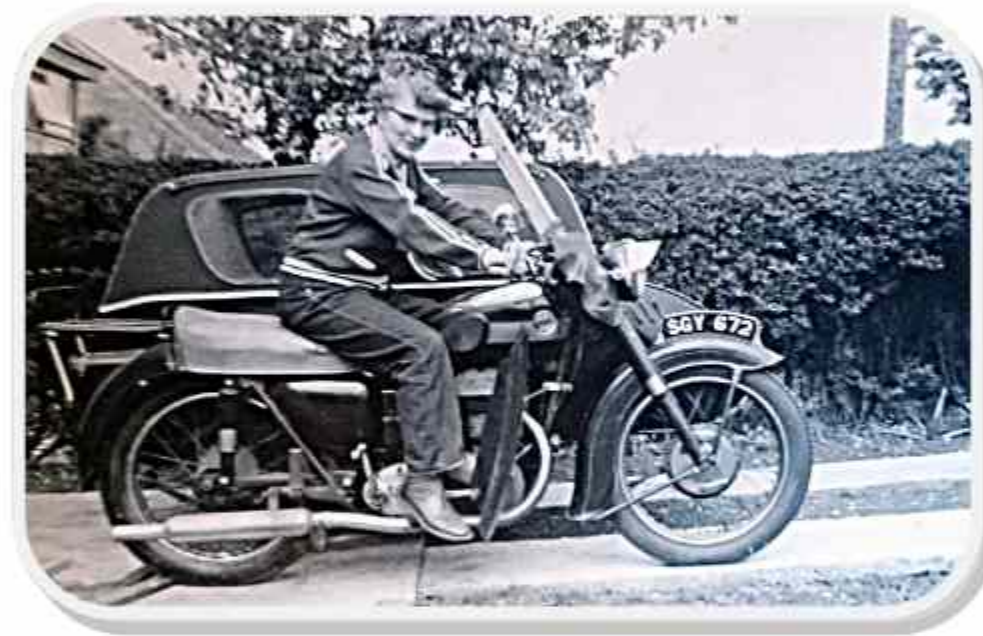




Left: Miss Emerson with her brother and a camping equipment c.1960s

*Above: Clacton holidays, with parents and relatives c.1960s
Private collection*

I still love going to classic car shows where people usually take me for an old fool at first. But when I ask all the right questions like the length of the chain, etc. they start chatting. My only regret was that I always wanted to own a 'Sunbeam' and nearly got it but then they were closing... it is the only motor bike that didn't have a chain. It was shaft driven and not very reliable.



Above: Miss Emerson on her motorbike Ariel 600 c1960s

Right: Miss Emerson with her father and aunt Cora

Private collection

Goodbye

Finally I can tell you this. There was a lady, poor Mrs Parish who was our neighbour. In those days people looked after one another and since she hadn't got anyone, my mother and other neighbours used to go in and see that she was well looked after. They tried to get her to feed and change her and so on. The last time I remember my mother came home and she was ever so in tears, she said: "Do you know what Mrs Parish has just said to us?" She said: 'you'd needn't stay I can hear the church bells and the church choir in Hockerill church', but of course, you know how far that is. She said 'it's so beautiful I can listen', and that's how she died listening to Hockerill church choir that she couldn't actually hear... it was in her head as she was dying. I thought it was quite wonderful to think.

So I already told you that I had a similar sensation with the kingfishers which I hear and see although they are not there any longer, but even more embedded in me is the smell of the oil and the roaring sound of my motorbike engine revving. It will always be in my bones. Oh, I do love my motorbike...



Acknowledgements

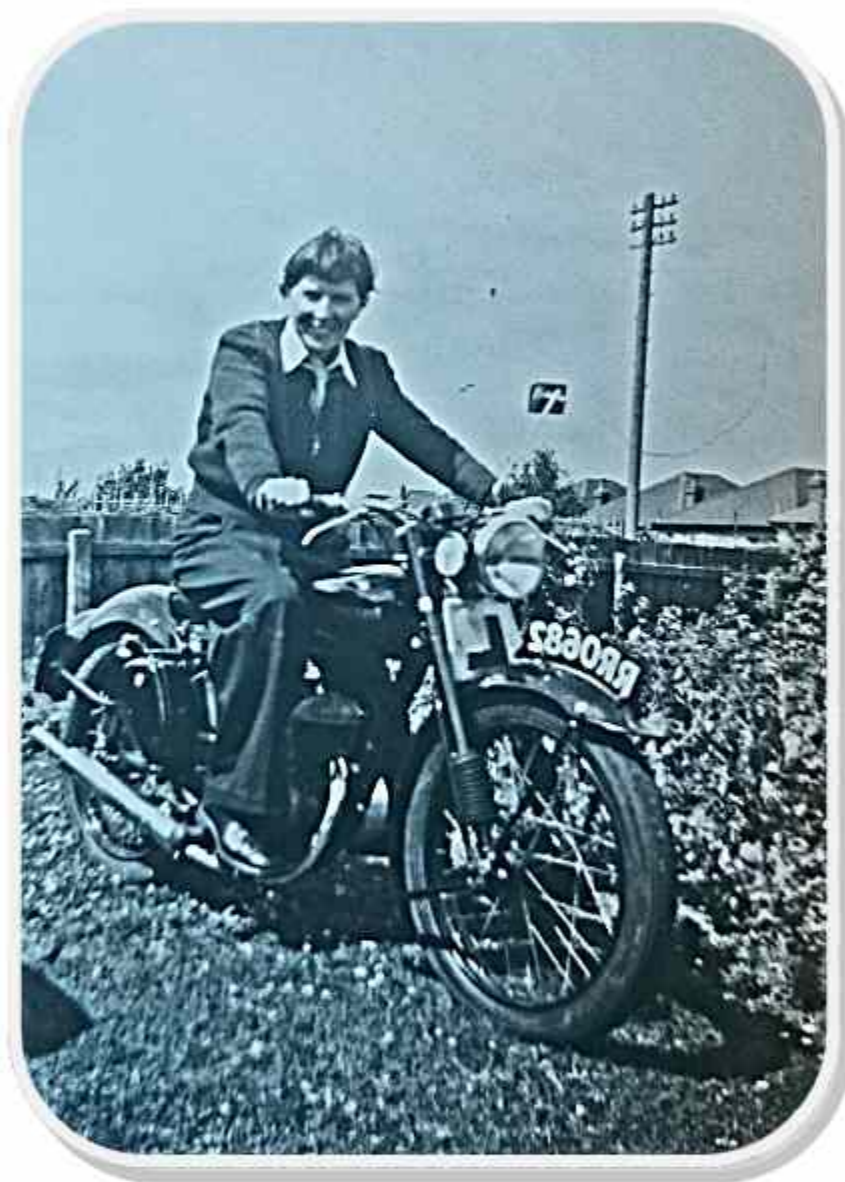
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*Miss Joan Emerson on Francis Barnett c.1950s
Private collection*

Afterthought

Being an amazing and versatile person, Miss Joan Emerson has been writing poems her whole life. These are a few examples of her art.

Garden blues

I'm looking for a gardener
Be him old or young
I'm looking for a gardener
To get my mowing done

I do like my garden
To be neat and fresh
So when my friends come visiting
It's looking at its best

I don't mind a lady
If she can push the mower
And has the lawns looking fresh and green
All ready for a shower

So if you're looking for a lawn to mow
And your price is not too dear
I have a lawn for you to mow
Now, and all year

Summer 2012



The outpatient

I'm sitting here wondering when
I shall see outside again
Nurses coming, people going
All in motion, to-ing and fro-ing
Won't they soon call my name?
Now here comes that nurse again
Oh no! It's not for me
How much longer will it be?
Now I'm getting quite excited
Oh no! Once again my hopes are blighted
Time and again there are new faces
Then more people fill their places
Staff and nurses move around
There are patients to be found
The doctors are busy and running late
We shouldn't grumble about the long wait
Everything's done to make things easy for us
So let's sit and relax, and make no more fuss

July 2013

Red bag

I had a little red bag
I had it yesterday
I wonder where I've put you
I wish that I could say
In you I put little gifts
To give to friends I knew
I wonder where I've put my bag
I've searched the whole house through
Little red bag, little red bag
Several days have passed
Let me find your hiding place
So I can pick you up at last

For the other Joan, 2010

Snow scene

I'm glad I'm indoors, looking out
Now that all the snow's about
Watching the busy, foraging birds
The scene, too beautiful for words

Trees clothed in white, not often seen
Peace and quiet, a magical scene
Sky full of snow, nearly touching the ground
Such dazzling whiteness, untouched all around

So I sit by my fire, warmed by its glow
I see only the beauty, not the coldness of snow
But later on, when comes the thaw
I don't remember the cold snow anymore

February 2012

The other Joan

We have shared many happy days
We understood each other's ways
She called herself the other Joan
Being friends together, we were never alone

You were there for me, and I for you
Our friendship was strong and really true
Tears are falling now you have flown
I'll never forget my dear friend
The other Joan

JE 2015

Joan's memories

I sit here
I am alone
It is so quiet
They've all gone home
It is so strange
I miss them all
I still expect To hear them call
I still expect To hear the door
And footsteps shuffling
On the floor
And feet stamping
Up the stair
I look around
They are not there
I sit here
Ears atune
Wondering if
They'll be here soon
They have gone
Away by plane
but they'll soon
Be here again
At the table I sit alone
Because my family
Have all gone home.



**Bishop's Stortford
Museum**

Rhodes